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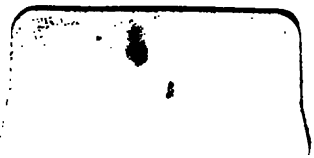

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HIGH NOON

HIGH NOON

A NEW SEQUEL TO
"THREE WEEKS"

ANONYMOUS

NEW YORK
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1911

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FOREWORD

I must make a confession.

It will not be needed by the many thousands who have lived with me the wonderful sunrise of Paul's love, and the sad gray morning of his bereavement. To these friends who, with Paul, loved and mourned his beautiful Queen and their dear son, the calm peace and serenity of the high noon of Paul's life will seem but well-deserved happiness.

It is to the others I speak.

In life it is rarely given us to learn the end as well as the beginning. To tell the whole story is only an author's privilege.

Of the events which made Paul's love-idyl possible, but a mere hint has been given. If at some future time it seems

best, I may tell you more of them. As far as Paul himself is concerned, you have had but the first two chapters of his story. Here is the third of the trilogy, his high noon. And with the sun once more breaking through the clouds in Paul's heart, we will leave him.

You need not read any more of this book than you wish, since I claim the privilege of not writing any more than I choose. But if you do read it through, you will feel with me that the great law of compensation is once more justified. As sorrow is the fruit of our mistakes, so everlasting peace should be the reward of our heart's best endeavor.

Sadness is past; joy comes with High Noon.

"The Queen is dead. Long live the Queen!"

THE AUTHOR.

SURVEYOR'S CUSTOMS WELFARE ASSOCIATION PORT OF
U. S. BAILEE SERVICE

HIGH NOON

SURVEYOR'S CUSTOMS WELFARE ASSOCIATION PORT OF
U. S. BAILEE SERVICE

CHAPTER I

IT was Springtime in Switzerland! Once more the snow-capped mountains mirrored their proud heads in sapphire lakes; and on the beeches by the banks of Lake Lucerne green buds were bursting into leaves. Everywhere were bright signs of the earth's awakening. *Springtime in Switzerland!* And *that,* you know—you young hearts to whom the gods are kind—is only another way of saying *Paradise!*

Towards Paradise, then, thundered the afternoon express from Paris, bearing the advance guard of the summer seekers after happiness. But if the cumbrous coaches carried swiftly onward some gay hearts, some young lovers to never-to-be-

forgotten scenes, one there was among the throng to whom the world was gray —an English gentleman this, who gazed indifferently upon the bright vistas flitting past his window. The *London Times* reposed unopened by his side; *Punch, Le Figaro, Jugend* had pleased him not and tumbled to the floor unnoticed.

There seemed scant reason for such deep abstraction in one who bore the outward signs of so vigorous a manhood. Tall, well-formed, muscular as his faultless clothes half revealed, half hid, his bronzed face bearing the clear eyes and steady lips of a man much out of doors, this thoughtful Englishman was indeed a man to catch and hold attention. No callow youth, was he, but in the prime of life—strong, clean, distinguished in appearance, with hair slightly silvered at

the temples; a man who had lived fully, women would have said, but who was now a bit weary of the world.

Small wonder that the smart American girl sitting opposite in the compartment stared at him with frank interest, or an elegantly gowned Parisienne *demi-mondaine* (travelling *incognito* as the Comtesse de Boistelle) eyed him tentatively through her lorgnette.

So Sir Paul Verdayne sat that afternoon in a compartment of the through express, all unconscious of the scrutiny of his fellow travellers; his heart filled with the dogged determination to face the future and make the best of it like a true Englishman; somewhat saddened—yes—but still unbroken in spirit by the sorrows that had been his.

Many years ago it was, since he had vowed to revisit the Springplace of

his youth, Lucerne, a spot so replete with tender memories, and each succeeding year had found him making anew his pilgrimage, though a sombre warp of sorrow was now interwoven in the golden woof of his young happiness.

This year he had decided should be the last. Not that his devotion to his beloved Queen had lessened—far from that—but the latent spirit of action, so innate to true British blood was slowly reasserting itself. For Paul romance might still remain, but as a thing now past. He was frank with himself in this respect, and he would be frank with Isabella Waring too.

One more visit he would pay to the scenes of his love-idyl, to the place where his beloved *Imperatorskoye* had come into his life, there to commune again with her in spirit, there to feel her regal presence, to seek from her that final su-

preme consolation which his wounded heart craved—this was Paul's quest. And then he would return to England—and Isabella.

It was the consideration of this resolution which shut the flying scenery from his gaze, which drew fine lines about the corners of his firm lips, and set his face to such a look of dominant strength as made the high spirited American girl muse thoughtfully and brought a touch of colour to the face of the pseudo Countess which was not due to the artifice of her maid.

Such men are masters of their own.

Paul Verdayne was not a man to shirk responsibilities. It is true, dark days had come to him, when a crushing burden had well-nigh smothered him, and a bullet to still his fevered brain had seemed far sweeter to Paul than all else life

might hold for him. But Paul was strong and young. He learned his lesson well —that Time cures all and that the scars of sorrow, though they form but slowly, still will heal with the passing of the years.

Paul was still young and he had much to live for, as the world reckons. He was rich (a thing not to be lightly held), one of the most popular M. P.'s in England, and the possessor of a fine old name. It would be a coward's part, surely, to spend the rest of his life in bemoaning the dead past. He would take up the duties that lay near at hand, become the true successor of his respected father, old Sir Charles, and delight the heart of his fond mother, the Lady Henrietta, by marrying Isabella Waring, the sweetheart of his boyhood days.

So Paul sat communing with himself

as the train rushed noisily on, sat and settled, as men will, the future which they know not of. Alas for resolves! Alas for the Lady Henrietta! Alas for Isabella! For Paul, as for all of us, the mutability of human affairs still existed. Were it not so, this record never would have been written.

CHAPTER II

WITH much grinding of brakes and hiss of escaping steam, the express at last stopped slowly in the little station and the door of Paul's compartment was swung open by the officious guard with a "Lucerne, your Lordship," which effectually aroused him from his reverie.

Paul quietly stepped out of the car, and waited with the air of one among familiar scenes, while his man Baxter collected the luggage and dexterously convoyed it through the hostile army of customs men to a *fiacre*. In the midst of the bustle and confusion, as Paul stood there on the platform, his straight manly form was the cynosure of all eyes. A fond

mamma with a marriageable daughter half unconsciously sighed aloud at the thought of such a son-in-law. A pair of slender French dandies outwardly scorned, but inwardly admired his athletic figure, so visibly powerful, even in repose.

But all oblivious to the attention he was attracting, Paul waited with passive patience for the survey of his luggage. For was not all this an old, old story to him, a trifling disturbance on the path of his pilgrimage? When one travels to travel, each station is an incident; not so to him who journeys to an end.

But Paul was not destined to remain wholly uninterrupted. As the other travellers descended from the carriage and formed a little knot upon the platform, the Comtesse de Boistelle, now occupied with a betufted poodle frisking at the end

of a leash, strolled by him. As she passed Paul she dropped a jewelled reticule, which he promptly recovered for her, offering it with a grave face and a murmured *"Permettez moi, Madame."*

The Comtesse gently breathed a thousand thanks, allowing her carefully gloved hand to brush Paul's arm.

"Monsieur is wearied with the journey, perhaps?" she said in a low voice. And her eyes added more than solicitude.

Paul did not deny it. Instead, he raised his green Alpine hat formally and turned impassively to meet his man, who had by then stowed away the boxes in the waiting *fiacre*.

In the group of Paul's late companions stood the American girl who had sat facing him all the way from Paris. He was no sooner out of earshot than—

"Did you see, Mamma?" she whispered to the matron beside her.

"See what, Daisy?"

"That French creature—she tried to talk to my big Englishman, but he snubbed her. What a fine chap he must be! I knew he had a title, and I'm just dying to meet him. Do you suppose he'll stay at our hotel? If he does, I'll find somebody who knows all about him. Now I understand why so many American girls marry titled Englishmen. If they're all as nice as this one, I don't blame them, do you?"

"Hush, child, hush!" her mother reproved. "How can you run on so about a total stranger?"

But the girl merely smiled softly to herself in answer, as she watched Paul's straight back receding down the platform.

HIGH NOON

Overwhelmed with a rush of memories, Paul climbed into the carriage. It was a fine afternoon, but he did not see the giant mountains rearing their heads for him as proudly in the sunshine as ever they had held them since the world was new.

For Paul just now was lost in the infinite stretches of the past, those immeasurable fields through which the young wander blithely, all unconscious of aught but the beautiful flowers so ruthlessly trampled on, the luscious fruits so wantonly plucked, the limpid streams drunk from so greedily, and the cool shades in which to sink into untroubled sleep.

Ah! if there were no awakening! If one were always young!

The *fiacre* stopped; and soon Paul found himself in the hall of the hotel,

surrounded by officious porters. The *maître d'hôtel* himself, a white-haired Swiss, pushed through them and greeted him, for was not Sir Paul an old and distinguished guest, who never failed to honour him with his patronage each year? Himself, he showed Paul to the same suite he always occupied, and with zealous care conferred with milord over the momentous question of dinner, a matter not to be lightly discussed.

"And the wine? Ah! the *Tokayi Impérial,* of a certainty. Absolutely, Monsieur, we refuse to serve it to anyone but yourself. Only last week it was, when a waiter who would have set it before some rich Americans—but that is over, he is here no longer."

Paul smiled indulgently at the solicitous little man. It was good to be here

again, talking with Monsieur Jacques as in the old days.

"One moment, more, Monsieur, before I go. Is it that Monsieur desires the same arrangements to be made again this year —the visit to the little village on the lake, the climb up the Bürgenstock, the pilgrimage to the Swiss farmhouse? Yes? Assuredly, Monsieur, it shall be done, *tout de suite.*"

And then with a confident air as of complete and perfect understanding on the part of an old and trusted friend, the bustling little *maître d'hôtel* bowed himself out.

Paul proceeded, with his usual care, to dress for dinner, pausing first to stand in the window of his dressing-room and gaze wistfully upon the lake he loved so well, now dimming slowly in the Spring twilight.

The last time! Ah, well, so be it, then. There must come an end to all things. And Paul turned away with a sigh, drawing the draperies gently together, as if to shut out the memories of the past.

How well he succeeded, we shall soon know.

He was the last to enter the restaurant, which was well filled that evening. On his way to his accustomed place he passed the table at which sat Miss Daisy Livingstone, his American fellow-traveller, dining with her mother; and another where the Comtesse, by courtesy, sat toying with a *pâté*. To Paul's annoyance, he was greeted further down the room by a member of his club; Graham Barclay was not a particular favourite of his, at any time, and furthermore Paul had no desire, just now, to be reminded of London. As

civilly as he could, he declined an invitation to join the party, pleading fatigue from his long journey, and moved on to the end of the room, where his old waiter, Henri, stood, with hand on chair-back, ready to help him to a seat.

"Deuced fine fellow, Verdayne," explained Barclay in parentheses to his friends. "A bit abstracted sometimes, as you see. But he'll be all right after tiffin. We'll gather him in for billiards later."

The eyes of more than one guest followed Paul as he walked the length of the restaurant, for Verdayne possessed that peculiar quality—that spiritual attraction—magnetism—(call it what you will, a few elect mortals have it) that stamps a man indelibly. But of all those who marked him as he moved among the

tables, none regarded him more closely than a lady who sat alone in a small recess, screened from prying eyes by a bank of greenery.

A marvellous lady she was, with hair as black as the sweep of a raven's wing, crowning a face as finely chiselled as any Florentine cameo. And if the diamonds about her smooth white throat had wondrous sheen they were not more lustrous nor more full of sparkling fire than her opalescent eyes.

Unseen by the preoccupied Paul, she leaned across the cloth, scarcely whiter than her pale face, and gazed at him with wonder—was it more than that? With a slight movement of her tapering hand she dismissed the liveried servant stationed behind her, and stayed on, with food and wine untouched. And Paul knew it not.

HIGH NOON

So near to us can lie the hidden path of our strange destinies until the appointed hour.

CHAPTER III

THE next morning Paul breakfasted on the terrace. The gay greetings of old friends, the pleasant babble in the breakfast room ill suited his reflective mood.

And as he sat alone under the fragrant pergola enjoying his cigarette and dividing his attention between his coffee and the Paris Edition of the *Herald,* a pale, dark-haired lady passed by as she sought the terrace for an early stroll. Paul's eyes were on his paper at that moment—and if the lady's well-bred glance lingered on him for a brief instant as he turned the pages of the daily, he was all unconscious of her presence.

Perhaps the lady may have seen something about the strong, wholesome, well-groomed Englishman that pleased her, perhaps she was simply glad to be alive upon that glorious morning, with the bracing breeze blowing fresh from the lake, and the sun sending his welcome rays down upon the mountainside. At all events, her lips parted in the merest shadow of a smile as she walked along the gravelled path with the veriest air of a princess.

Alas! the smile and the dainty picture which the dark-haired lady made as she moved down the flower bordered path in the sunshine, her morning gown clinging gracefully about her slender figure, were alike lost on the engrossed Paul. With his eyes glued to the criticism of a sharp-penned writer on the last measure before Parliament, he read on, all oblivious to

his surroundings. Even here, at his beloved Lucerne, the man of affairs could not escape the thrall of the life into which he had thrown the whole effort of his fine mind.

Sir Paul had not quite finished the breezy article when, with an all pervading blast of a sweet-toned, but unnecessarily loud Gabriel horn, a big green touring car came dashing up to the gate of the little hotel, and with a final roar and sputter, and agonized shriek of rudely applied brakes, came to a sudden stop. From it there emerged, like a monster crab crawling from a mossy shell, a huge form in a bright green coat—a heavy man with a fat, colourless face and puffy eyes, and Paul, glancing up at the ostentatious approach, recognized in him a *nouveau riche* whom a political friend had insisted on introduc-

ing in London a few days before.

Schwartzberger, his name was (Paul had a peculiar trick of remembering names—the fellow was said to have made a fortune in old rags—no, it was tinned meats—in Chicago. It was his proud boast that he started in the business as a butcher's errand boy but a few years ago, and now, no supper bill at the *Moulin Rouge,* no evening's play at Monte Carlo, had ever made a material depletion in the supply of gold that always jingled in the pockets of his loud clothes. His was the fastest car and the gayest coloured on all the Continent, and he was alike the hero and the easy dupe of every servant.

As the stout American came waddling uncertainly up the walk, with a certain elephantine effort at jauntiness, he nearly collided with the foreign lady

who had crossed his path to reach the further limits of the terrace. Not having a cautioning horn attached to his anatomy to warn heedless trespassers from his way, the large person was forced to give ground, but had some difficulty in veering from his course sufficiently to avoid an accident. However, the *grande dame* slipped past him quickly and disappeared amid the shrubbery—but not before her extraordinary beauty had dazzled the pork-packer's beady eyes.

He turned and stared at her.

"Gee! What a peach!" he murmured aloud, in words which came wheezing from between thick lips. "I wonder if that's the Countess's lady friend she spoke of."

Then, catching sight of Verdayne, and knowing him at once for the swell English guy he had met at the Savoy, he

panted up and slapped Paul's shrinking back with his fat, white hand.

"Hullo, Verdayne! Just the man I'm looking for! I didn't know you were in this part of the world. Hurry up with your breakfast and join me and my friend, the Countess de Boistelle, in a spin around the lake. Perhaps you know her already. No? That's easy arranged —she's a particular friend of mine, and she's got a chum of her's staying here too, I guess. Make up a foursome with us and I'll promise you this old place won't be half slow. When it comes to making things hum, nobody's got anything on the Countess."

"Damned bounder!" growled Paul under his breath; and aloud: "Thanks, I have an engagement. Awfully sorry, and all that, you know." And he rose, as if to end the interview.

"I'll bet you've got a date with that queen you were just talking to. Verdayne, you're the foxy one. Well, I can't say you haven't got good taste, anyhow, though she's a little too quiet for me."

"Talking with whom?" inquired Paul, in a cold voice.

"Why, that lady that just left here. She nearly ran into me getting away."

"Schwartzberger," answered Paul, with great deliberation, as he folded his newspaper, "I believe that a lively imagination is as necessary to the ideal management of the pork-packing industry as to all other business activities. Permit me to observe that I can predict for you no cessation of the remarkable results you have achieved in your chosen profession." And with a short nod he started down the path.

Schwartzberger's beady eyes blinked after Paul a moment.

"These Englishmen always do get up in the air over nothing," thought the pork-packer, as he gazed after Paul with a puzzled look on the wide expanse of his countenance. Then he turned his great bulk and waddled ponderously into the hotel, in search of his particular friend, the Comtesse de Boistelle.

Toward the landing on the lake Paul descended, with his heels biting viciously into the gravel at every step.

"Confound these beastly people!" he growled. "Why are they allowed to roam about the earth, making hideous the beautiful places." His soul revolted at even the suggestion that he could have thought for any but his beloved Lady—his Queen whom he had not seen for more than a

score of years, and would never, on this fair planet, behold again.

On a coign of vantage overlooking the steep slope the pale lady stood with her face turned toward the Bürgenstock. She watched Paul as he stalked angrily down the hillside, and in her mind compared him with the monster she had just avoided. She gazed after him till he reached the slip, where a small boat was ready for him; and she lingered on while he stepped lightly into the skiff, picked up the oars, and rowed away in the style an Eton man never forgets. Motionless she remained, until he disappeared behind a fringe of larches that crept close to the shelving shore. Then slowly, as with regret, she turned to resume her stroll.

A faint colour had stolen into her cheeks; the wonderful eyes had grown

very bright and wistfully tender and deep. The rare old lace on her bosom fluttered with her quickened breath, as softly she murmured:

"Ah! My entrancing one, now I have seen thee—and I understand!" And the larches by the shore trembled as if in sympathetic emotion as the gentle breeze echoed her sigh.

A half-hour later the big green touring-car spluttered on its noisy way again; but its tonneau contained no *partie carrée*. A smartly clipped poodle perched in the centre of the wide seat—on one side of him lounged the shapeless green form of the pork-packer, on the other side gracefully reposed the Comtesse de Boistelle.

And if the complacent admiring glances which Schwartzberger heavily bestowed on the lady of his choice were

perhaps too redolent of the proprietorship in which a successful pork-packer might indulge, they were at least small coins in the mart of love, which is Springtime in Lucerne.

Up the lake Paul rowed briskly, working off his ill-humour in the sheer exertion of his favorite sport. The splendid play of his powerful muscles carried his light craft rapidly over the blue water, until he reached a secluded little bay where he had often gone to escape from troublesome travellers at the hotel. Beaching his skiff, he threw himself at full length on the rocky shore, where he lay quite still, drinking in the beauty of the prospect.

Occasionally the wind bore to him from some distant ridge or hidden glen the tinkling of a cow-bell, as the herd

wandered here and there grazing upon the green uplands. Once—for an instant only—a mirage appeared upon the southern sky, as if in mute testimony to the transitory character of all earthy things, the fleeting phases of human life. It seemed to Paul, with a score of years dimming the vista of his young manhood, not more shadowy and unreal than the wonderful scenes in which years before he had played all too brief a part.

Little by little, as he lay motionless, the sun stole toward the zenith. But to Paul, alone with his memories, the earth seemed bathed in a luminous pall—a mysterious golden shroud.

"Oh! God," he cried, out of the anguish of his soul, "what a hideous world! Beneath all this painted surface, this bedizened face of earth, lies naught but the yawning maw of the insatiable universe.

This very lake, with its countenance covered with rippling smiles, is only a cruel monster waiting to devour. Everything, even the most beautiful, typifies the inexorable laws of Fate and the futility of man's struggle with the forces he knows not."

He looked far off, wistfully, to the great pile of the Bürgenstock, the one place in the whole world that for him was most rich in tender memories. And yet he knew that its undulating blueness hid hard, relentless rock, as unyielding as the very hand of death itself.

"Love," he said slowly, his heart swelling with the deep sense of his loss, "love should lead to happiness and peace—not to conflict, murder, and sudden death."

And he lay there pondering, until at last, as always in the end, his better genius triumphed. And when the evening sun-

shine turned the windows of the distant hamlets into tongues of flame and set the waters in the little bay a-dancing, he rowed slowly back to the hotel, his own resourceful English self again.

Far up on the side of the Bürgenstock a dim light shone—a faint glow, until a cloud bank, stealing ever nearer, nearer, crept between like some soft curtain, and the silent mystery of the evening fell upon the lake, and wrapped the mountains in a velvet pall.

CHAPTER IV

NEARLY a week had passed since Paul reached the Mecca of his pilgrimage. Other guests at the hotel had seen little of him, except as they glimpsed him of a morning as he made an early start to some favourite haunt; or again as he returned at nightfall, to pass quickly through the chattering groups upon the terrace or about the hall and retire to his suite, where usually his dinner was served in solitary state.

His resolutely maintained seclusion was so marked that even his English friends, accustomed as they were to the exclusiveness of their kind, commented on it. Barclay openly lamented, for, as he said, "Was not Sir Paul the best of

company when he chose, and why come here to this gay garden spot to mope?"

Daisy Livingstone, the American girl, from that meeting in the train had found a peculiar attraction in her big Englishman, as she called Verdayne playfully when speaking of him to her friends. She knew now, of course, that he was the famous Sir Paul Verdayne, the personage so prominent in British public affairs. And she remembered, too, with a woman's quick intuition for a heart forlorn, Paul's sad, almost melancholy face.

One balmy evening, as she was slowly strolling back and forth beside her mother on the terrace, "Mother," she said in a low voice, "why should Sir Paul look so *triste?* He has everything, apparently, that a man could wish to make him happy—health, wealth, and a success that can be the result only of his own efforts.

And yet he is not happy. What hidden sorrow can he have—some grief, I am sure—that should keep him away from all companions? Every day he goes away alone. And I have seen him almost every night, coming back to the hotel, only to disappear in his rooms, where he must spend many lonely hours."

"Really, Daisy, you are much too interested in this Verdayne. When I was a girl, I never should have paid such close attention to the humour of a strange man. Don't you think that you are becoming altogether too attracted by this Englishman?"

Mrs. Livingstone was an old-fashioned mother who was little in sympathy with the free and easy point of view of radical latter-day Americans.

"Not at all, mother. I find something to interest me in all the people here. Sir

Paul is merely a distinct type, just as that awful fat American with the automobile is another in his own way, and that horrid French creature who goes motoring with him every day.

Then there is the beautiful dark-haired foreign lady, too—she is more fascinating to study than all the rest. She must be a Russian from her colouring, and, besides, she wears those wonderful embroideries. And her servants, too, talk some outlandish gibberish among themselves. Of course she belongs to the nobility, you can see that, even in the way she walks.

"Really, mother, while I'm a true enough American not to be dazzled by the glamour of a coronet, there is something in a long line of well-bred ancestry. You know the old saying, 'Blood will tell.' I've woven quite a fairy story

about those wonderful eyes of hers. She is the princess in the fairy story whom some fine prince will find and wake up with a kiss. I wonder—perhaps my Englishman——"

She paused, quite carried away by her own fancy.

"Ah! there she is—my fairy princess—now, down there!" and the girl indicated a rustic seat beneath a spreading cedar some distance below them. As Daisy chattered on, she and her mother had drawn close to the edge of the terrace. And there in the gathering dusk, looking out over the lake, sat the pale-faced lady with the dark hair and the glorious eyes.

As the two Americans stood gazing down the declivity, a small boat cut across their line of vision and came up to the slip with a sweep which only the expert oarsman can achieve.

"The Englishman—Sir Paul!" exclaimed the girl. "You'll see him soon coming up the path that passes close to the big cedar."

And even as she spoke, the figure that jumped from the skiff started up the narrow trail. The lady, too, must have been watching him, for she rose suddenly from her seat and quickly gained the terrace, which she crossed immediately to enter the hotel.

"Why did she leave when she saw him coming?" the girl asked, quick to divine the hidden impulse. "Why did she run away like that? I'd rather have stayed and had a good look at him! I wonder if she doesn't want him to see her. Now that I think about it, she never stays where he can meet her."

"Come, child! Don't be absurd!" said Mrs. Livingstone, and locking her arm

within that of her daughter's, she drew gently away.

With lagging steps Paul climbed the hill. The natural quieting effect of the day spent in tender cherishing of old-time memories had not been dispelled by his recent violent exercise, and the rustic bench invited him more than the bustling hotel and the prospect of a dreary dinner. But he forced himself to his tub and evening clothes, and once more dined alone. The fixed habits of a lifetime are not to be lightly set aside for some passing whim.

That night would be Paul's last at Lucerne. The week had been one of strain, and there had come over him a fatigue scarcely less intense than he could have felt had he actually experienced anew the scenes he had been living over in imagination. But with weariness had come a

resignation which at last seemed final—a renunciation of his dream-life. Now must he put away forever the haunting memories that seemed always outlined, however, dimly, on the tablets of his brain. To-morrow he would be speeding on his way westward, to London and duty. Can we blame Paul if he shrank a bit from defining the latter too precisely.

He dined very late, and after an hour spent with his cigar, a newspaper, and letters that demanded attention, he felt the oppression of the room and stepped out into the night, where myriads of stars dotted the sky with their bright points. On the bench beneath the great cedar, a little distance down from the terrace, Paul seated himself to enjoy a final cigar. The cool air put new life into him; he felt calmer—more at peace with the world—than had been the case for many years.

All was settled now. He was sure of his ability to return to England, to go straight to Isabella and tell her all. That she would marry him, he had no doubt. Too much of the old fondness still persisted between them for any other outcome to be possible. Indeed, he could see no reason why they should not make each other contented.

Paul no longer used the word happy, even in his solitary thoughts. Happiness, that priceless elusive treasure, can come only to a heart at peace in the warm sunshine of love. Material things can make for contentment, but ah! how uncertain is that will-o'-the-wisp happiness.

As he sat pondering over the future, which now lay before him more definitely almost than he had dared to think, a faint sound caught his ear—the merest stir as

of something moving above him. The stairway leading from the terrace to the path below formed a partial shelter for the bench. He turned instinctively, gazing at the landing, but saw nothing.

He had just decided that his nerves were playing him a trick, when the sound was repeated. This time he felt sure that some one, some thing, was stirring close back of him. Again he turned and scanned the flight of steps, gray in the bright starlight, until suddenly his eyes stood still. They rested as if stopped by some mysterious compelling power—some living magnet that seemed to hold them against his will. And then in the luminous light the delicate outlines of a face seemed to establish themselves, like a shadowy canvas painted by some fairy brush.

It was a face Paul knew right well, for

it had scarcely left him, waking or sleeping, for many, many years. Framed in the dark foliage, it leaned toward him over the parapet, half visible, half obscured.

In a twinkling the weight of a score of years slipped like a cloak from Paul's shoulders. With a wild, choking cry he leaped to his feet, and stretching both his arms above him, "My Queen! my Queen!" he called.

But as he moved the vision vanished. And Paul knew that it was only a cruel jest of Fate, and himself to be as ever but the plaything of his evil genius, which never ceased to torture him. Relentlessly the load of years crept back upon him and like an Old Man of the Sea wound themselves about his shoulders and clutched him in a viselike grip, and he

sank with a convulsive gasp upon the bench again.

Soon the spasm passed. But for Paul the night was no longer beautiful. Only unutterable sadness seemed to pervade the place. The very air seemed heavy with oppressive grief. And rising, he tottered like an old man around to the foot of the steps and dragged himself slowly up.

He had reached the landing immediately above the bench he had just quitted when he saw a blur of white—an indistinct patch in the half-light. He reached forward, and his trembling fingers closed upon a lady's handkerchief. And then—he caught the faintest breath of a perfume, strange yet hauntingly familiar, as if the doors of the dead past had opened for an instant.

Heavens! Her perfume! His brain reeled. He rushed up to his sitting-room,

and there, under the bright light, he examined the trophy. It was real—there was no doubt about that. Paul had half fancied that after all it was only another trick of his imagination. But there lay the scrap of filmy stuff upon his table, as tangible as the solid oak on which it rested.

He folded it carefully and placed it in his pocket. For some moments he pondered over the strange coincidence, and as he thought, the clouds lifted from his brain again. If this were chance, surely there was some consistency in it all. Fortune always sets mile-posts on the road to her, and with a thrill Paul realized that he was still a young man and that this tiny suggestion from the destiny which directs poor mortals' affairs was not to be disregarded. The time for action had come.

He descended briskly to the hall and scanned the visitors' list. The names —most of them—meant nothing. Except for Barclay and his party Paul knew no one in the place. Indeed, he had held himself aloof from chance acquaintances.

By this time no guests remained about the lounge. In the doorway stood Monsieur Jacques. Paul went up to him.

"I found a handkerchief outside just now," he said, forcing a careless voice. "Perhaps the lady to whom it belongs has just come in?"

"No one has entered for a *quart d'heure,* Sir Paul. *Hélas!* It was not so in the old days. It was always gay then at this time of the night, with the band playing and all the guests chattering like mad." The *maître d'hôtel* breathed a gentle sigh for the halcyon days of long ago.

HIGH NOON

Momentarily baffled, to his rooms Paul turned again, and threw himself into a big armchair, where he sat wondering till in the gray light of morning the formless shadows around him took the shape of the luxurious furnishings of his suite.

What face had peered at him through the branches? In spite of the token he had found on the steps, Paul could scarcely believe that the vision had been one of flesh and blood. The handkerchief with the familiar scent?—merely an odd coincidence. But still—well, the puzzle might be worth the solving.

At last he rose, and drawing the heavy hangings close to keep out the insistent light, he lay down upon his bed, to fall into a troubled sleep.

CHAPTER V

WHEN he awoke it was almost noon, and too late to catch the Paris train. Fate again! And yet there arose no feeling of rebellion in Sir Paul. If he were in the hands of a great will, let that same will direct. There would be another train in the evening, but Paul would have none of it. His mood had changed. He could not leave the place quite yet. So he dressed leisurely; and it was not till mid-afternoon that his flannel-clad figure appeared upon the lawn. He had no energy for a walk or row, and spent the time till dinner reading and smoking.

That night he did not wish to dine alone. The approach of darkness, with

its eerie suggestion of his strange experience of the night before, made him crave the society of his kind. As he passed through the lounge, carefully groomed as ever, his friend Barclay called to him.

"I say, Verdayne! Join us to-night, won't you, old chap? We will be dining early."

The cheery English voice was what Paul needed, and though he had all the week avoided the party—there were three men—now he gladly greeted them. Barclay, totally unable to account for Paul's sudden recension from his aloofness, nevertheless secretly rejoiced. He greatly admired Verdayne, and had felt rather hurt at his keeping quite so much to himself. With a wisdom beyond his usual capabilities, however, he refrained from making any comment and only

showed the pleasant eagerness of a cordial host.

They were the first to enter the restaurant, and as they sat there with talk of familiar things in Paul's ears he began to feel himself again.

After dinner Paul played billiards, and then took a hand at bridge, and when at length the game broke up he was sure of himself; the amusement of the evening had been sane enough to convince Paul that there would be no visions for him that night. He took a few turns back and forth before the hotel, and then, rounding a corner of one of the wings, he came upon a little rustic tea-house hidden away among a wealth of shrubbery and young trees.

A fancy to explore it seized him, and he followed the path that led toward it. The heavy vines clustering complete-

ly over the structure made the interior of an inky blackness. Paul halted on the threshold and struck a match. At first, as the phosphorus flared, the darkness beyond seemed intensified. Then, as the flame subsided, Paul saw—the face again, looking straight into his—the same beautiful face, it seemed, that had gazed at him on that memorable night years before, the same red lips, the same wonderful eyes.

The blazing match fell from his fingers, and in another moment he clasped a warm and clinging figure in his arms. Without a word their lips met in one long kiss. To Paul it was as if he had been transported to some distant sphere, and in some mystic fashion transcending time and space, he held his lady in his arms again.

But it was no dream; that kiss was a reality.

A low cry suddenly broke the silence—a quick exclamation of alarm. It was a language Paul remembered well, for his Queen had often talked to him caressingly in her own strange tongue. He started and turned his head, to see a tongue of flame leaping shoulder-high behind him. The match had fallen on some inflammable drapery and set the place afire. He seized a rug and tried to smother the blaze, but the little house was a tinder box.

The lady had not moved meanwhile. But as the sound of running feet and a loud call of *"Au feu! Au feu!"* shattered the quiet, she sprang like a frightened fawn out into the darkness. An instant later, blinded by the glare of the con-

flagration, Paul followed. He was too late. The darkness had swallowed her completely, and with the blaze still dazzling his eyes Paul could scarcely see even the hurrying forms that came racing up the path.

In a few moments the tea-house was a ruin. Paul hurried to the hotel, where several startled guests had gathered in somewhat scanty attire, alarmed by the cry of fire ringing out into the still night. But the lady of the midnight kiss was not there.

CHAPTER VI

TOO stirred within his heart to sleep, Paul paced the lawn, in the vain hope of seeing her again.

He was walking lightly over the wet grass with almost silent feet, so occupied with his thoughts that he came near to walking into a couple talking beneath a tree.

When, however, he beheld them, he came to a sudden standstill, all his senses alive, his quick intuition telling him he was in the presence of some matter of moment.

A little portly man with an evident air of authority was talking to a woman in a flowing cloak. Emphasizing his remarks with true Gallic gestures, but with all his

excitement making an evident effort to be guarded in his tone, he was all oblivious to Paul's presence.

The girl Paul could not see plainly, but it was with some unaccountable notion of doing her a service, and not with the remotest idea of eavesdropping, that he stepped softly and silently to the further side of a tree trunk.

Then he heard the girl's voice saying in low, quiet, earnest accents:

"Why will you not let me rest? Why do you pursue me in this way? Surely it is inhuman to adopt these methods. Is it fair to follow me to a place like this and insult me in this way?"

The man mumbled something which Paul could not catch.

Then he heard the girl utter a little cry.

"Look!" she exclaimed eagerly. "Look! I will make you an offer. Free me from

this horrible nightmare, give me your word that you will not persecute me further, and I will give you these."

Paul heard the rustle of draperies, and was conscious that the girl reached out her hands.

The man greedily took something from her. His head was bent over the object, whatever it might be, long and earnestly.

Then he heard a thick voice say in French: "They are beautiful, very beautiful. But what are they to us? You think they are worth a hundred thousand roubles, eh? Suppose they are—what of that? Do you think a hundred thousand roubles will save you? Bah!"

The man chuckled thickly.

"But they are very pretty baubles," he went on, "and since you offer them to me,

I see no reason why I should not keep them."

"Ah!" cried the girl. "Then Boris will be satisfied?"

"Satisfied!" exclaimed the man, "satisfied, for this much! Not he! Why, it's ridiculous."

"Then give them back to me," said the girl, quietly, with a quaver in her voice. "Give them back to me. Would you rob me?"

"I am not robbing you," answered the man, sullenly. "I am taking what you offered me. I shall not give them back. It is impossible for you to make me. You would cry out, would you? What good would that do? Cry out, call for help—do what you like—but think first what will it mean for you. Give them back? Not I! I——"

But his speech ended suddenly at this

point, for Paul, always quick to action, took quick action now.

Moving round the trunk of the tree, he caught the man deftly by the collar of his coat, kicked his heels from under him, and brought him with a heavy crash to the ground.

The man lay still.

In a second Paul was on his knees beside the prostrate figure. With swift fingers he searched the man's clothing and found a mass of jewels in the breast-pocket of his outer coat.

In a twinkling he had them out, and, rising to his feet, he held a heavy string of diamonds towards the girl.

"Madam," he cried, "permit me to befriend you. I do not know who you are, but——"

His voice trailed away into a little gasp, for the frightened face that stared

at him in the moonlight with starting eyes was the face of the lady he was seeking.

Paul stood still gazing mutely at the girl and holding out the jewels towards her.

When he had recovered from his great surprise he moved a step nearer to her.

"Madam," he said, "permit me to insist that you shall take these things back."

Without a word she stretched out her hand and took the jewels from him. She hid them quickly in the folds of her cloak, and all the while the expression of amaze and fear on her face did not abate.

At last she pointed to the man lying beneath the tree.

"You have not killed him?" she asked, in a low voice.

For answer, Paul turned again and knelt at the fat man's side. He inserted his

hand skilfully over the unconscious man's heart, and then rose to his feet again.

"No," he said, almost with a laugh. "Just knocked him out; that is all. He will be all right directly, and I fancy he will be glad to walk away without assistance. I imagine he is not a character who would care for much fuss and attention at this time of the night."

Again Paul drew near to the girl and peered gravely and keenly, but at the same time with all deference, into her face.

"I think," he said quietly, "that it will be better for you to walk away while we are still undisturbed. If you will allow me, I will accompany you toward the hotel. If I may be permitted to say so, it is hardly fitting that a lady carrying so much property about with her should be strolling here unattended."

His tones were so kind and cheering that the lady smiled back at him.

"At least," she said, "you are a very sturdy escort."

She walked beside him without saying anything more, apparently satisfied to be in his charge.

Paul said not another word except, "This is the way," and then, guiding the girl through the trees, he reached the main path and helped her to step over the low iron railing; thence he piloted her in silence until the hotel was in sight.

As the building loomed up in the darkness, Paul stopped, and said earnestly:

"I trust you will permit me to wait and see you safely on your road. Apparently one never knows what may happen, and, believe me, I have no wish you should suffer a second adventure such as the one through which you have just passed."

"Thank you," said the girl in a scarcely audible voice. Then turning towards him, she stretched out her hand impulsively.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you. I cannot tell you how much I thank you. You are a gentleman. It is not necessary to ask you as a gentleman not to mention to anyone in the world what you have seen or heard to-night."

Paul bowed.

"You may trust me absolutely," he said. "I give you my word of honour that not one single word of this shall pass my lips. But may I say something else? May I be allowed to make an offer of help? I have money, I have many resources at my command. I would willingly pledge myself to serve you in any way. I should be only too proud, too glad to help."

"No, no!" cried the girl, sharply, with

a piteous little gesture and a note almost of agony in her voice.

The distress in her tones was so real that Paul made no further effort to persuade her. So, lifting his hat, he stood waiting for her to take leave of him. Once more she stretched out her hand impulsively, and he took it in his own.

"Thank you," she said, in the same low, earnest voice, "thank you again and again." Then she turned and walked quickly away.

Paul strolled slowly back to the hotel, in a more perplexed state of mind than before. Was it possible that he had stepped suddenly into the midst of some tragic mystery? What sorrow, what terror had made the eyes of the girl so wistful and so beckoning?

That she might be suffering some profound grief, or might be the centre of

some bit of distressing family history, might well be conceived. But what extraordinary combination of inappropriate events could possibly cause her to seek to buy quittance of such a man as he had left insensible?

He sat far into the night, turning all these things over in his mind.

Obviously it was not some question of personal honour which involved the necessity of maintaining some sordid and disgraceful secret, or the lady would not be risking her personal safety, and to a great extent her reputation, by being present at such a rendezvous.

Whatever it might be—the mystery which embraced her—Paul determined, whether it pleased her or not, that he would range himself on her side.

To do this, however, it would be necessary to discover what the mystery was,

and he proceeded to set up and then demolish a thousand and one theories to account for her plight; and he was still far from the solution when he fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII

AGAIN the mid-day sun was gilding the canopy of his couch when Paul awoke. He sprang up and dressed hurriedly. That day he must discover who the lady was.

Renewed inquiries of Monsieur Jacques yielded no further information. Rose-red lips and coils of raven hair no longer made on the *maître d'hôtel* the same impression as in the golden days when the band played dreamy waltzes and dashing gentlemen leaned caressingly over dazzling shoulders.

Of the man he had felled, Paul spoke never a word. Apparently he had vanished as he had come—unknown.

"Truly, Sir Paul, there has been no

lady here to answer your description. But stop! A Russian lady perhaps, you say? *Il est possible.*" Monsieur Jacques laid a searching finger on his speculative brow. "Mademoiselle Vseslavitch, *peut-être.* Yes—tall, surely,—a brunette, too, like most of those Russians. She left this morning, quite early."

Paul's heart leaped, only to stop again at the last sentence.

"Left? Where did she go, *mon ami?*" He and Monsieur Jacques were good friends, and Paul knew that his interest, though perhaps unaccountable to the old inn-keeper, was still in safe hands.

"That I do not know. But we shall see what we shall see. One moment, Monsieur."

Calling a porter, the *maître d'hotel* gesticulated with him for a moment.

Then he returned to where Paul waited impatiently.

"Emil here says that he purchased bookings to Langres for the lady," he said.

Langres! Isabella and London were a million miles from Langres at that instant! The memory of that kiss alone remained.

Paul's mind was made up. He would start for Langres that very day. He hurried to his rooms, where Baxter was soon packing his boxes. And then Paul's eye fell on the table, on the picture of Isabella that he had brought with him. She had given him an excellent likeness, in a leather case, the day he came away. Her frank eyes seemed to smile at him amusedly.

Paul pulled himself together.

"I am mad!" he told himself—"to be

carried away by a momentary impulse, to forget all for a fancied resemblance! . . . Paris! Baxter!" he said curtly, turning to his valet.

And when Paul reached the station it was with the firmest of resolutions to hurry home, stopping only one night in Paris to break the tiresome journey.

"En voiture!" the guards sang out, and Paul climbed into his carriage, once more the staid M. P. he thought—But was he? Could he ever be again?

Toward Paris, then, the fast mail bore him rapidly; and at the same time toward Langres. When they reached Bâle, Baxter telegraphed to the *Hôtel du Rhin* in Paris for a suite. At Belfort Paul directed him to send another message cancelling the reservation. And—alas for Paul's good resolutions!—at the station of

Langres-Marne, a mile from the old cathedral town itself, he left the train, taking only a big Gladstone bag with him, and sent Baxter on alone to Paris, to wait until he should arrive.

Another short journey remained, so in company with the inevitable soldier, priest, and old lady with a huge umbrella, Paul took a seat in one of the open cars of the little rack-and-pinion railway that runs up the steep hill through the apple orchards to the old cathedral city. In a few minutes the train stopped at a miniature station.

It had begun to rain, and Paul was conscious that he was an object of interest as he stood on the steps of the station looking about him in search of a *fiacre.*

No vehicle was in sight, so he set himself to tramp up the hill to the *Hôtel de l'Europe,* at which he had stayed long

years before, and of which he still entertained a lively recollection of its cleanness and its quaintness.

The *hôtel* slept, and Verdayne heard the bell pealing through the silent house as he stood shivering and waiting on the doorstep.

Presently he heard the sound of bolts being withdrawn and a shock-headed night porter thrust his face out into the damp evening air.

The sight of Sir Paul's tall figure drew his immediate attention.

"What does Monsieur require?" he asked in accents which were at once civil and surprised.

"Let me in," said Verdayne, "and I will do my best to explain."

The man led the way to a delightfully large and airy room, half *salon,* half

chambre à coucher, where Paul was glad to remove the stains of travel.

First he took the precaution of drawing a couple of half-crowns from his pocket and slipping them into the man's hand.

"You need not be alarmed at my appearance," he said. "I am not a fugitive from justice. I am merely an English gentleman who has lost his friends and who is in search of them.

"Tell me if you have staying in this hotel a tall young lady with dark hair and brilliant eyes? It is possible that she is travelling *incognito,* but if she has given her right name it will be Mademoiselle Vseslavitch."

The man scratched his head and looked worried.

"I would help Monsieur if I could," he said, "but I can only assure him that

there is no lady staying in this hotel at all. Alas! the season is very bad, and we have few visitors."

That this dark-haired lady was not at the *Hôtel de l'Europe* did not disconcert Verdayne very much. He had foreseen that she was hardly likely to stay in the hotel with which English tourists would be acquainted.

"It is many years," he said to the man, "since I stayed here. In fact, I have practically no recollection of Langres except of this hotel and the cathedral. I should therefore be very much obliged if you could furnish me with a complete list of all the other hotels."

"Why now," said the man, "that is an exceedingly simple affair." And he rattled off a list.

Paul repeated them after him.

"And you think," he asked, "that this is a complete list?"

"Quite complete, I should say," said the man, "for Monsieur's purpose.

"Permit me to help Monsieur," he went on. "Monsieur will pardon me, but possibly this may be some romance."

He shrugged his shoulders, but with such an air of civility and respect that Verdayne could not quarrel with him.

"At any rate, it is not my business to inquire. For the time it is merely my end to serve Monsieur well. Be seated for a moment while I make coffee and bring rolls and butter. It will fortify Monsieur against the damp air."

Laughing a little, Paul suffered the man to bustle about. The fellow was deft indeed, and soon Verdayne was glad that he had listened to his counsel.

Midnight drew near and the porter

turned the lights out, but Paul sat until cockcrow, smoking and pondering on the strange paths into which one's feet are sometimes led.

Shortly after eight, the man, who had been busy cleaning boots, returned and made a gesture towards the sunlight, which was streaming into the room.

"If Monsieur is in haste," he said, "I will not seek to detain him. By this time the other hotels will be open. If Monsieur's mission is urgent he should continue his search."

His air was so friendly and so charming that Paul resorted to the only expression of appreciation of which he could conceive. He gave the man another ten francs, and pledged him to silence. None the less, he had little faith that the

man would keep his tongue still. A Frenchman must talk.

After a light breakfast Paul went out into the fresh morning air and began his search. In turn he visited the *Hôtel de la Poste, le Grand, de la Cloche,* and the rest of them, wandering around the cobbled streets of the sleepy village, and strolling through the market-place, gay with the green and red and russet of its vegetables, the blue and crimson of the umbrellas over the stalls. Then, in the unclouded sunshine, he walked around the ancient ramparts, from which point of vantage he looked down upon wide stretches of sunlit country, dotted here and there with vineyards.

It cost him a pretty sum to purchase the confidence of half-suspicious porters, but by the time he had worked through the list with which the friendly servitor

had provided him he had come to the conclusion that Mademoiselle Vseslavitch was, of a certainty, not in one of these hostelries.

Was she still in Langres? The doubt troubled Paul greatly.

All the time, as he walked on through the narrow streets, Paul's eyes sought the object of his quest in vain. Apparently he was the only foreigner in the town. It was nearly twelve as he turned into the *Promenade de la Blanche Fontaine,* a fine wide avenue of chestnut trees which recalled to Paul the Broad Walk at Oxford, and being the only pedestrian abroad at that hour, he said a few swear-words to himself by way of consolation.

Clearly, this search for the lady might prove a case for Sherlock Holmes, while Paul's own detective ability, he admitted, was more of the Dr. Watson order.

CHAPTER VIII

IT was after twelve when Paul sought the shade of the *Hôtel de l'Europe* again. There the few sounds that pierced the mid-day stillness were chiefly those that penetrated from the kitchen, where *Monsieur le Cusinier* and his assistants were busily engaged in the preparation of *déjeuner.* And it was not long before Paul sat down to a delightful meal, served in a vine-framed window. He was alone in the room, and feeling the need of encouragement he invited the genial landlord to share a bottle of Burgundy with him.

The two men sat there, toasting each other more and more gaily as the red nectar fell lower in the long bottle, until

finally, perceiving his host to be in a confidential mood, Paul questioned him about tourist travel.

"Ah! Monsieur! May the *bon Dieu* bless you! You are the first to visit us this summer. It is early yet. But soon they will come to see our wonderful cathedral, and stay a day or two with us."

Paul's spirits drooped again at this information, but for an hour after finishing his demi-tasse he lingered at the table, hoping for some clue, while *Monsieur le Propriétaire* chattered on.

There was indeed but little to amuse the traveller in Langres, after the cathedral, beyond the quaint streets and the beautiful old timber-framed houses. Doubtless Monsieur Verdayne—he did not know Paul's title—would wish to see the cathedral that very afternoon; it would be pleasant to go to vespers. A

little later for himself, he would recommend another walk to the ramparts to see the sun-set.

Meanwhile, he knew of some truly marvellous Chartreuse in the cellar below. Would not Monsieur compliment him by tasting it? Monsieur would, with much pleasure; and accordingly a dusty bottle was soon forthcoming.

So another slow hour wore away. And again, in the cool of the afternoon, Paul ventured forth on another tour of inspection.

This time the search was successful. In a narrow street he discovered a small hotel which went by the name of the *République*. Here his question put to the plump Madame who opened the door, at once kindled interest.

"Yes, there was most decidedly a Russian lady staying there—a young Russian

lady of most distinguished appearance. She had arrived about noon on the day before, and said she intended to stay there for a couple of days, as she expected friends."

"Had the friends arrived?"

"No, not as yet. Perhaps Monsieur was the friend for whom she waited?"

Verdayne was hardly prepared for this, and found the situation a trifle awkward to explain.

"No," he said to the fat Madame, he was not the friend whom Mademoiselle had come to meet. He was, however, an acquaintance, and would call later in the day.

Contenting himself with this, he lifted his hat and strolled down the street, followed by the shrewd, smiling eyes of the landlady.

He walked on until he felt sure he was

no longer observed; then he walked back again.

On the opposite side of the street to the *République,* a few doors up, he discovered a *café* of humble aspect, provided with tables beneath an awning, at which the thirsty could sit and refresh themselves.

At one of these tables Paul took a chair, and at the risk of violent indigestion called for more coffee. He sat and sipped the sweet and chicory-flavoured liquid and turned about in his mind the best means of discovering the reason of Mademoiselle Vseslavitch's visit to Langres.

He debated with himself whether it would not be better to go boldly over to the hotel and made his presence known; but he reflected that such a course might be unwise. Indeed, the very knowledge

of his presence might result in her abandoning the business which had called her so suddenly from Lucerne.

As time went on he glanced up and down the street, watching everyone's approach with interest. Towards half-past four his attention was aroused by the appearance of a man whose aspect was out of keeping with the little street.

The stranger was above middle height, and bore himself with a certain air of quiet dignity. He was dressed in black, his clothes being well cut, though of obviously foreign tailoring.

It was the man's face, however, which riveted Paul's attention. It was very dark, and the nose was somewhat flat; not at all the prevailing French type. Yet it was a face of great refinement and distinction, accentuated in a strange

way by a long, black, and well-trimmed beard.

The man, plainly, was not a Frenchman, nor, Paul decided, was he a German; certainly he was not an Italian nor an Austrian. A subtle something about the man's whole appearance, indeed, brought Verdayne to the conclusion that he was a Russian.

And then that rare gift of intuition which had always been Paul's great aid in times of trouble told him that this dignified and daintily-walking stranger was in some manner connected with Mademoiselle Vseslavitch's presence at the *Hôtel de la République.*

So certain of this was he that at once he took the precaution of drawing further back into the *café,* where he could sit in the shadows and watch the passage of the

stranger without arousing any interest himself.

Twice the black-bearded man walked up the street, glancing sharply at the *République,* and twice he walked back with the same meditative and dilatory air. Then he turned the corner and disappeared.

The proprietor of the inn busied himself about the *café,* and, seeming curious about the visitor's long sojourn, Paul ordered a further supply of the chicory-like coffee.

It was not long before his patience was rewarded. There was some bustle about the door of the inn, and then he saw the fat landlady bowing and scraping on the white doorstep, and out of the shadows into the sunshine stepped the girl he had come to find.

Dressed all in black and thickly veiled,

Mademoiselle Vseslavitch came quickly out of the doorway and walked down the street.

Paul, who had previously taken the precaution to settle his score, immediately rose and walked after her.

The street was so narrow and there were so many people about that he had to follow pretty closely in order to avoid losing her. He noted with some surprise that she walked straight ahead, as though with studied purpose, never faltering and never so much as glancing to the right or to the left.

Down the hill they went and so into the space about the cathedral, where busy women had set out their wares—poultry, pottery, vegetables and the like.

More than one head was turned to note the quick, silent passage of Mademoiselle Vseslavitch. Hers, indeed, was a

physique which could not have escaped notice, no matter what its surroundings.

On the market-square, having a clearer view before him, Paul slackened his pace and allowed the distance to increase between them.

Still the beautiful Russian lady walked straight ahead, as one who follows an oft-trodden path and knows full well whither that path leads.

She moved up the cathedral steps, and as she did so Paul saw approaching the sombre figure of the black-bearded man whose presence in the little street by the *Hôtel de la République* had aroused his interest earlier in the morning.

But though their steps were evidently leading them to the same spot, neither the black-bearded man nor Mademoiselle Vseslavitch made the least sign that either was aware of the other's presence.

The girl passed into the cathedral, the man following closely on her heels.

In fear of losing sight of them Paul almost ran across the square and darted up the cathedral steps. But for all his speed his feet fell silently, so that neither the girl nor the man who followed her, heard.

CHAPTER IX

ONCE in the cathedral, Paul paused in his pursuit.

The picturesque interior was aglow with the declining rays of the sun, which streamed through a large window behind the organ upon a great silver Calvary surmounting the high altar, and gilded the white caps of a handful of old *bourgeoises* sprinkled here and there in the straight-backed pews.

The bell tolled and a low murmuring began. They were reciting the Office of the Rosary. Paul was stirred by the scene as never before by any devotional services and in spite of his eager desire to learn more about the dark-eyed lady, all through the prayers and responses he was

rapt as in some mystic spell. With the *bénédicité* by the young abbe, a column of incense rose before the Calvary, a moving pearl-coloured shaft in the soft light, for the sun had set. And as the cantors and the pious folk at worship sang *Tantum ergo* the Host was borne out through the gate at the east end of the choir to the Lady altar.

To Paul it seemed as if the full meaning of the Roman Catholic faith was borne upon him for the first time. With a tremendous influence upon his emotions, its intimate relation with the soul and the sentiment of the human hearts gathered there quickened the utmost depths of his nature. Having thus witnessed that impressive service, it was impossible for him to feel that he was not one with it, and of it; and all differences of religious creeds escaped his mind.

Surely, he thought, this is a communion of the spirit—the fruit of simple feeling and natural impulse. For the moment he had forgotten that he was the descendant of a long line of staunch supporters of the Church of England.

The singing ceased, and still Paul stood with head uncovered. In his exaltation the thought came to him that this vision so like his Queen, which he was seeking here in this byway of the earth, had been sent to him by his dear Lady. Had she not told him that although parted from him in the flesh, she would always be with him in the spirit? And now that her beautiful being had been borne away from this world of strife, was it not possible that by some intercession she had been able to send another, almost as divine as herself, to comfort and strengthen him?

From that time the impulse which had sent Paul on his search was fired by some mysterious, guiding hand. His quest became a sacred duty. Filled with the new mission, seized by a sudden fervour as were the knights in olden days, crusaders who had made their vows on the cross in that very sanctuary, Paul moved quietly towards the chancel, there to bespeak a blessing.

With outstretched hand the priest murmured the words Paul craved. Then he rose, and was walking slowly toward the door of the transept, when he came to an image of the Virgin, before which a single candle burned. And there, before the sacred figure, knelt the lovely object of his pilgrimage. Impressed by a reverence of the scene, Paul passed on, filled with a holy joy. At last he felt a strange exalting peace.

Paul little dreamed the nature of the lady's prayers. Conscious of the suddenly awakened love, which that feverish kiss had stirred to life within her, she had come to the cathedral to seek for spiritual help. She had felt the need of some higher will than her own to strengthen her resolve to steel her heart against this fiery wooer. She was filled with an almost irresistible longing to throw herself into his arms and confess her quickening love. And that she knew too well she must not do.

At last she lifted her bowed head, and rising slowly to her feet, she genuflected before the altar. Then she turned and slipped through a door of a small side chapel, into which the black-bearded man closely followed. Paul's instinct was to follow, too, and, in the calm security of a

mind made up, he retraced his steps down the aisle.

He saw that it would be impossible for him to approach the side chapel by the same way as the black-bearded stranger had, if he wished to remain unobserved. So he turned aside and drew near to the chapel by another way, sheltering himself behind the pillars, which cast deep shadows on the floor.

Paul was following his old stalking habit, which he had acquired when in pursuit of big game among the Rockies. Yet with all his care he almost blundered into his quarry. For, as he moved silently round a pillar, he became conscious that he was so near to the lady that he could have stretched out his hand and touched her.

In an instant he drew back and stood still behind a massive column. He could

see nothing, but he could hear the voices of the girl and her companion in low and earnest conversation.

At first it was the man who did most of the talking, and from what few of his words he could catch Paul judged him to be speaking in French. He droned on for some minutes, and then his voice died away.

Mademoiselle Vseslavitch now asked several questions in quiet, low tones. The man answered sharply and incisively, and it seemed to Paul that there was command in his voice.

For a while there was a complete silence, which at last was broken by long, choking sobs. Edging a little farther round the pillar, Paul saw the lady kneeling upon a *prie-dieu* as though in an abandonment of grief. She was crying as though her heart would break, her face

buried in her hands. The sombre man stood by like some tall shadow, silent and unmoving.

A quick and great desire to go to her aid, to gather her into his arms and comfort her, took possession of Verdayne. But great as his desire was, he forced it down, recognizing that the moment had not come for him to intervene.

Presently the sombre man moved closer to Mademoiselle Vseslavitch's side, and, putting out a gloved hand, touched her lightly, and with the air of one offering silent sympathy, on the shoulder.

Paul heard him murmuring what must have been words of comfort, and before long she lifted her face and resolutely wiped away her tears. Then she rose and went forward to the altar, on the steps of which she knelt and prayed. Finally she came back to the black-bearded man and

held out her hand, and Paul saw with still growing wonder that the man bent over it as though with great respect and brushed her fingers with his lips. Without any further word she walked quickly and quietly away, making for the door through which she had entered the cathedral.

The man, with a little sigh, picked up his hat and followed her, Paul hard upon his heels.

Outside in the sunshine, Verdayne watched the fair Russian make across the square by the way which she had come. Her companion turned abruptly to the right and walked rapidly away.

Paul followed her till she came to the *Hôtel de la République,* when she disappeared through the doorway.

Darkness fell and Paul saw no more of

his beautiful Russian. In spite of all his efforts she still remained as great a mystery as ever. Almost beside himself with impatience, he returned to the hotel. Many wild, almost boyish, schemes, by which he hoped he could meet the lady entered his head. Most of them Paul rejected—and none of them could be put into execution, for the one responsible for their conception remained hid in the little *hôtel.*

Considerably at odds with the world, he went in to dinner, the excellence of which did not dispel his gloom.

"Counfounded silly, this!" he complained to himself. "Here I am, a lonely knight, eating a marvelously good dinner in enforced solitude, with a beautiful lady imprisoned in the upper rooms of the castle. In the rare old days I could go up and knock the jailers' heads together,

break in the door, and bear the captive damsel away on my charger. But in this unromantic age I can't even send in my card."

CHAPTER X

ALL unconscious of Paul's presence only a few short steps away Mademoiselle Natalie Vseslavitch, for so we will call her until she herself chooses to reveal more, had rushed to her rooms, her heart almost overwhelmed by a new and dreadful burden.

The tidings she had left Lucerne to know, whose bearer was the black-bearded gentleman, which had so aroused Paul's curiosity, were simply these. Her hand was sought in marriage.

Truly not such news as ought to make a maiden weep, you say, and yet what base political ends have not been served through the holy offices of the marriage service. And when a suit bears the ap-

probation of one's sovereign, is it not more nearly a command?

The cousin of our beautiful Natalie, one Prince Boris Ivanovitch, had long been a persistent suitor. What booted it that she would have none of his attentions? Was he not an heir apparent, and should a girl's whim, her likes or dislikes, stand in the way of a powerful union? The Tsar of all the Russias had given him official sanction; to Prince Boris, and alas! to Natalie, the ceremony was as good as performed.

But what of the desires of her own tender girlish heart, her hopes, her sacred mission? Were all to be sacrificed on the altar of a great political alliance? Natalie cast herself on a divan in a paroxysm of grief and rage, and the imperial note, heavy with a gold crest and seals, fluttered in tiny pieces on the floor. In vain

her maid essayed to comfort her. This latest blow was too heavy. Why did Boris not let her give him the vast estates, why must he insist upon *her?*—her love he never had, never could have. Once more the couch shook with her choking sobs.

After the first dreadful shock was over, Natalie calmed herself, and the innate strength, the quiet determination which had carried her so far on her mission asserted itself. She would obey—the thought of disobedience cannot come to faithful subjects—but there was no haste. Time can accomplish much.

Then, as the events of the past few days flitted before her mental vision there crept into her cheeks a faint tinge of colour as she thought of Paul. "Ah, my beloved—yes, beloved, though you know it not. I must see you once more."

And the sudden memory of the hour when she last saw him so eager, so loving, all the fine lines of his virile strength thrown on the black screen of darkness, by the light of the burning summer house, mantled her cheek anew in crimson.

He of all the men she had ever seen was the one most worth loving. And then in confusion again at this admission, deep though it was in her thoughts, she dismissed her maid and curling up before the fire set her woman's wit to match the machinations of her greedy relation.

And as she pondered, she smiled. If she *had* acted on a sudden impulse once, she felt that she could be deliberate now. Having been somewhat indiscreet in the rustic tea-house, with a woman's inconsistency she was determined to veer to a course of conduct exactly opposite.

She felt too well her power to draw

Paul to her—indeed, what woman does not know her own capability to attract? And here was an opportunity to gain a brief respite from the grim path on which her destiny seemed to be leading her. She *would* see him again.

Her bright eyes roved to the dainty table near at hand. She picked up a perfumed note, and read it again, and as she read, a happier look smoothed away the sharp lines of mental anguish which had marked the beautiful face but a short time before. The crested sheet bore the address of the Dalmatian Embassy in Paris, and was from the lovable old Countess Oreshefski, whose husband was the honoured Ambassador.

"My dearest little Natalie," the cordial note of invitation began, and concluded with a reassurance that the Countess ex-

pected her on the ninth of May, without fail.

Yes—the ninth of May—that was to-morrow. The Comtesse was insistent, and the Ambassador himself had charged his spouse to invite her. Very well! She would be there.

And Mademoiselle Vseslavitch called her maid and gave her instructions to be ready to leave for Paris by the morning train.

The next day the little *café* across the street from the humble *Hôtel de la République* was the richer by a generous gold piece, and the rubicund *propriétaire* marvelled to his equally rubicund wife over the peculiar habits of the Englishman, who preferred to drink much black coffee and smoke many black cigars sitting at the little table in the doorway,

rather than see the beautiful cathedral, as did all the other tourists.

Finally, Paul, impatient at his lengthy vigil, elicited the information, so much desired and yet so disappointing, that a *grande dame,* for surely she must be such to have so many servants, had honoured the humble hotel across the way by her presence for a brief twenty-four hours and only that morning had taken the train for Nice.

After this bit of information, mingled with much more voluble, mine host had further occasion to remark on the strange actions of "these English." For Paul's sudden departure cut short what the landlord considered a really capable flight of oratory on his beloved cathedral.

CHAPTER XI

PAUL did not reach Nice in a particularly pleasant mood. He knew that the task of finding the lady was much less simple than it had been at Langres. But he made a thorough search through the visitors' lists of all the hotels.

His persistence, however, found no reward. He could find no trace of Mademoiselle Vseslavitch whatever.

He had been in Nice two days, and his unsuccessful search began to tell upon his nerves. Realizing the need of relaxation of some sort—some diversion which might for the time being, turn his mind upon trivial things—he decided to spend an evening at Monte Carlo.

Paul was no great gambler—it was a

sport in which he had never taken more than a passing interest, but just then he thought it would serve his purpose.

He found himself after dinner therefore in the Casino at Monte Carlo, in a room flooded with light and with many people present—a quiet room for all that, for there was little sound except the monotonous cry of *croupiers* and the sharp rattle of a ricochetting roulette ball.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the light he stepped forward into the room, only to stand still again and remain motionless, as though turned to stone.

For there, at a long table in the centre of the room, with piles of gold and notes before her, heavily veiled, sat—Mademoiselle Vseslavitch.

A little cry which Paul could not prevent breaking from his lips drew the eyes of all upon him. Mademoiselle herself

glanced up and saw his gaze upon her.

She started and instantly Paul turned away and endeavoured to hide himself amid the odd jumble of men who stood round the table watching the play.

"What was she doing here?" Paul thought. A thousand bewildering conjectures flashed into his brain, only to prove inadequate.

Try as he might he could not reconcile the so obvious fact that she was a lady with the peculiar incidents which trod hard upon each other's heels. He recalled the meeting with the strange Frenchman, which still remained a most baffling mystery.

Unconsciously, Paul took note of the men who hemmed the table in. Every type of face presented itself—the fleshy cheeks of middle-aged Jews, of pale clerks and salesmen, prosperous-looking

men who might have been commercial travellers, and here and there a more refined-looking man in evening-dress.

A few were still playing, but the majority were watching the fortunes of the veiled lady. She was, besides, the only woman in the room.

Paul stood for a few moments and watched her play. Nor was it difficult, even to his unpracticed eye, to see that she had begun to wage a losing fight against the bank.

Draped in a long opera cloak from which her bare arms were thrust, she sat forward eagerly in her chair, her lips trembling, her eyes bright as stars.

Her face and figure were in extraordinary contrast to her surroundings.

Every man in the room, Paul thought, appeared to feel that he was in the presence of one who not only had the right,

but the power, to command respect, and the coarse faces by which she was surrounded surveyed her with a certain deference.

As the game went on and the *croupier* monotonously raked in the winnings of the bank, Paul suddenly divined the motive which had induced the lady to come there. Undoubtedly it was the hope that she might win enough to satisfy the cruel demands of those who persecuted her.

Quite evidently disturbed by his entrance, for the next few minutes she had apparently lost all track of the successful theory which she had been following. And Paul knew well enough that if a good player once becomes unnerved, his luck, for some strange reason, will change with his mood, and no efforts, however bold or desperate, will avail him anything.

It amazed Verdayne beyond measure that the lady could play such a game with so consummate a skill and so much evidence of experience. He judged that at some time or other she had had a little fling at Monte Carlo, and that profiting by such knowledge as she had acquired before, she had now been playing an inspired game for some incalculable stake.

If she won against the bank it would release her from her torment; no other theory was possible.

It made his heart grow cold with rage as he appreciated that he had been made the innocent instrument of such a hard experience for her.

So convinced did he become of this fact that he shouldered his way through the crowd, and leaning over her chair, whispered into her ear:

"Don't be alarmed. I see you have

been greatly upset. Please allow me to assist you."

The man at her right hand scowled angrily, but Paul turned to him with an urbane smile. "As you do not seem to be playing," he said, "perhaps you will allow me to have your chair?"

Nor had the man any alternative but to vacate his seat.

Paul's spirits rose as for the first time in his life he found himself seated by the lady's side, playing on her behalf, to win a desperate game.

But the girl's inspiration was gone, and Paul's knowledge of this form of gambling availed him nothing. Time after time they lost until practically nothing remained of the great pile of money which had been stacked on the table before her when he had entered the room.

The girl watched the money dwindle with every evidence of consternation.

Paul sought to console her.

"Don't despair," he whispered. "I think I have enough with me to see us through."

When he had at first sat down to assist her she had stared at him with considerable astonishment. Now she appeared utterly confused.

"I don't understand," she said in a low voice. "You have certainly done your best to help me, but I cannot see why you wish me to win."

Paul turned and looked her full in the eyes.

"How long will it be," he asked in a low voice, "before you come to trust me?"

Without further word he drew from his pocket the liberal supply of bank-

notes with which he had prepared himself for his evening's play, and laid them on the table before his astonished companion.

As this little scene had attracted more attention from those about him than pleased Verdayne, he indicated with a slight nod to the *croupier* to proceed, and calmly placed a pile of gold pieces of large denomination on the green double nought.

The wheel spun. The ball clicked slower and slower. The gaming spirit of the devotees once more claimed them and the veiled lady and her chivalrous escort were forgotten in the interest centered on the little ivory sphere.

Slower and slower and slower it ran, until it settled in place with a last click.

The company drew a mingled long breath. The monotonous sing-song voice

of the *croupier* chanted, "Twenty-six and the black wins," and he raked away the stake from before the veiled lady.

Paul's face never changed, nor did the lady speak. Once more the gold was piled, and once more raked away. The other players, forgetting the strange entrance of the lady's champion, were now absorbed in following his failing fortune.

Agan and again Paul lost, until finally the last of the generous pile was swept away. With a truly stoical British smile Paul reached for his cheque book, and glanced about him for some one who possibly could identify him. But the lady rose from the table with a little gasp and steadied herself with her hands on the back of her chair.

At the same moment the door by which Paul had entered opened again, and in

there came two gentlemen in evening dress. A third man followed closely behind them, and a flush of irritation crept up the back of Paul's neck as he recognized Schwartzberger.

The room was quite hushed. The men about the table had been awed by the vast sum of money which the mysterious lady had staked and lost.

As she moved a step forward as though to go, they drew aside to give her free passage, so that now she found herself face to face with the men who had just entered.

Looking over her head, Paul saw the pork-packer glance quickly at him, his face a complete study in astonishment. He bowed to the lady, but said nothing. It was Paul who spoke.

"This is most unfortunate," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked the lady.

"Your loss," said Paul hastily. "This is no fit place for you to remain in. Allow me to show you the way out at once."

He thrust himself between her and the two men who had entered, whereupon Schwartzberger burst forth in an angry voice that was perfectly audible to all.

"You damned British hypocrite!" he roared. His face was purple and he seemed suddenly to become inarticulate with rage.

Paul pushed the baize-covered door open and first bowed the lady out.

"Mademoiselle," he said, in a formal voice, "you will greatly oblige me by stepping to the other end of the passage. I have something to say to these gentlemen."

Making a little inclination with her head, the lady walked slowly away, leaving Paul to confront Schwartzberger.

And Paul by no means minced matters.

"Pardon me," he said, facing about once more, "but your assistance is not required. You will be kind enough to call on me at the *Hôtel Métropole* to-morrow morning, when I shall ask you for an explanation. Till then I have no further need of you." And he turned and passed through the door, leaving the man once more speechless.

With a few steps Paul reached the lady, who was waiting for him. As he approached she turned to him, lifting the heavy veil which had hid her features, and then, leaning toward her in the subdued light of the passage-way, Paul gazed with amazement into the face of—the Comtesse de Boistelle.

CHAPTER XII

THERE come times in every one's life when explanations, even if one might give them, are useless. And Sir Paul Verdayne realized that fact to its fullest when he faced the quasi Countess in the Casino vestibule.

What unhappy inspiration had caused her to dress herself in a manner almost identical with that in which Mademoiselle Vseslavitch had appeared at Lucerne? Mentally, Paul roundly damned a score of times the imitative instinct of the sex. He could not forgive himself for having mistaken a person of the Comtesse's stamp for the lady whom he had sought.

But there the Comtesse stood. And

Paul was conscious that in the glance she bent on him there was more than amazement at his Quixotic replenishing of her vanished fortunes. In the excitement of the losing play, she had no thought of the motive which might have prompted Paul's act. Now that it was done, she had instantly decided, after the manner of her kind, that it was a tremendous bid for her favour. And the unconcern with which such a sum had been placed at her disposal appealed to just such a temperament as hers.

The Comtesse de Boistelle was not one to place too low a value upon her own attractiveness. The attentions lavished on her by her porcine American admirer had lacked the artistic touch of this *coup* of the English nobleman, and she was willing to capitulate on the spot in favour of the latter.

All this—and more—Paul read in the warm, admiring glance of the Comtesse which met his astonished gaze. The horrible futility of any attempt at explanation struck a chill to his heart, and started the perspiration on his forehead. Flight, ignominious flight, seemed the only escape, and yet at this, the sturdy British spirit of Sir Paul rebelled. A flash of inspiration—a memory from his school-days, came to mind, as he groped for a plan, in the line from Virgil, "In the middle way lies safety."

With a bow whose courtesy was irreproachable, Paul spoke first:

"Permit me to send you to your hotel, fair partner of a losing venture." He smiled grimly at the unconscious truth in his chance phrase. "To-morrow may give me the great pleasure of a further

acquaintance—and under less depressing circumstances."

Then, before the Comtesse could quite marshal her vocabulary to reply in a fitting manner, Paul had bowed her through the great entrance; the door of the carriage shut, and she was driven away.

The uncomfortable sense of having made a thorough-going ass of himself was not conducive to sound slumber on the part of Sir Paul that night. Nor did it aid in preserving his temper during the unpleasant scene the following morning when Schwartzberger, still furious with rage, called at the *hôtel.*

It was a relief, however, to Paul to have some object on which to vent his pent-up feelings, and if the pork-packer did not quite understand all that he said,

Paul at least left no mistake in Schwartzberger's mind as to the total lack of grounds for the latter's jealousy, and filled him with a proper awe of the wrath of an Englishman once aroused.

Paul realized that by the time she met Schwartzberger, if not before, the Comtesse would discover the veiled emphasis on mere probability in his parting suggestion as to any future meeting. So he was not surprised to see the tonneau of the big green motor car with its customary occupants whirling past him as he drove to the station that afternoon.

Well! the unbelievable *faux pas* which he had committed—thanks to chance and his own imbecility—had turned him from his search. He no longer had the heart to linger about Nice peering into strange ladies' faces. The Lord only

knew what blunder he would make next
if he continued to look for her there!

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN Paul stepped down from a railway-carriage in the *Gare de l'Est* in Paris two days later, his language had improved slightly. But he was still cursing himself for a consummate ass.

Baxter, who had received instructions to meet him, relieved him of his travelling bag, and a taximeter cab, whisking him quickly to the *Place Vendôme,* soon deposited him at the *Hôtel du Rhin.*

As for the Russian lady, Paul was a bit discouraged over the adventure. Langres and Paris were two entirely different places. What chance had he of finding her here?

He confessed to himself that it was

not a promising undertaking, yet sooner or later everyone came to Paris. Here he was, and here would he stay, for a time at least. Perhaps,—who knew?—he might find her more easily than he dared hope. And from his apartments he looked out over the tree-tops.

The sight of miles and miles of chimney pots were not at all reassuring.

"Well! I'll never find her, mooning away up here," he thought. "I'll go down to dinner—and then for a plan of action."

That night he went to the theatre, but his thoughts were not for the elegantly gowned daughters of respectable *bourgeoises* who disported themselves for his amusement. What if they did play the parts of grand duchesses better than those great ladies themselves know how? Only one woman on earth interested Paul.

And—confound his luck!—he did not know where in this great town he could find her.

Our Paul was not in a particularly pleasant frame of mind when he strolled out upon the pavement—not waiting even for the piece to end.

Another hour spent at a boulevard table impressed him as the height of stupidity. He chafed under the enforced inaction of the situation. "How many more wasted hours must he endure?" he asked himself.

He saw them slowly stretching out before him—days into months—months into years—years into eternity. Ah! God! that must not be!

And while Paul was wondering, speculating over what seemed well-nigh impossible, the lights of the Dalmatian Em-

bassy in the *Faubourg St. Germain* gleamed brightly out upon the asphalt pavement.

In a sitting room on one of the upper floors sat Natalie Vseslavitch and the wife of the Ambassador. The guests of the evening had gone, and they were having one of those little, intimate ante-retiring chats so dear to the hearts of all women.

"Now, my dear," the elder lady was saying, "I insist that it is high time you were married. It is ridiculous for a charming girl like you to take the stand you have. Let me see—you're thirty now—and not a single man will you encourage—scarcely tolerate—except a few grey-beards like my own good husband."

Natalie feigned gay laughter, though a bitter pang shot through her heart at

the unconscious stab of the good Countess.

"Just because you fell in love," she replied, "you expect me to do the same at will. I repeat to you, as to all the rest, I would not give a *kopeck* for any man I have ever met. *Pouf!* they do not interest me. Look! my adored one, I warn you that I shall prove a most intractable guest if you attempt to inveigle me into any alliance. Ah! you look guilty already! You see, I know you of old, you dear maker of marriages!"

The Countess reddened slightly at the charge, but laughed away her momentary embarrassment. It was true her interest in her young companion had led her to manage *rencontres* with various eligibles of the Countess's acquaintance, and she had already in mind two or three

new possibilities—men prominent in the younger diplomatic set.

"Ah, well! you pretty little incorrigible!" the Countess sighed, "some day you will thank your dear old friend for sheltering you under the wings of her experience."

And thus they said good-night affectionately and parted—Madame to plan some new way of entrapping her charming friend into matrimony; Natalie to fall into a deep study as she prepared for the night.

The subject of her thoughts, she felt sure, could no longer be in Langres. Fortunately, one can shift his thought-scenes around the world in a twinkling. Paul, on the other hand, had spent some seven dragging hours on his journey to Paris.

The next morning as she glanced over the columns of the *Matin,* the Countess exclaimed:

"*Voila!* Sir Paul Verdayne is at the *Hôtel du Rhin.* You are too young to have known him, my dear. Those sad years you were fortunately away at the Convent." And the kind-hearted old lady's eyes filled at the remembrance of Paul's sad story. "A charming man, truly. I shall send him a note at once, asking him to dine with us to-night—we need one more, and he is the very person. It is some years since I have seen him, but in London he came often to the Embassy."

The elder lady did not perceive the somewhat startled look on the face of Mademoiselle Vseslavitch.

"I shall have him take you in to dinner, my dear," she continued. "He is

most charming company when he wishes to be, I assure you."

"Oh, Countess, no!" the young woman cried. "Let some one else have your wonderful Englishman. Good old Baron Lancret will amuse me sufficiently, my dear."

"Ah, but no. The dear soul has grown quite deaf since you last saw him. I can not think of allowing it. Be a good child now. This is no plot. Sir Paul is an incurable misogynist—the only man I know who would not fall in love with you. See! your old friend is doing her best to provide you with an ideal dinner-partner. What more could you wish? It is settled."

And a servant was promptly dispatched to the *Hôtel du Rhin.*

"Do the Count and myself the favor to

dine with us this evening," Paul read when he opened the note. "You will not have forgotten your old friends of a half-dozen years ago? We shall be charmed to see you again—and I shall expect you without fail."

Well, he had no engagement for that night—and Paul sent back a polite note of acceptance. He remembered many pleasant functions that he had attended in years past at the Dalmatian Embassy in London. After all, he had to do something. He could not go about searching for the vanished lady every moment of the day and night. That much distraction, at least, he would allow himself.

It was now eleven o'clock. He would wait until *déjeuner* was over, and then he would go out somewhere—anywhere—so long as there were moving crowds of people to furnish some chance

of his meeting her again. Next time, without fail, he would manage a conversation.

That afternoon then he stepped out of the *hôtel* and engaged a *fiacre*—a taximeter would be of no use, Paul thought. Tearing through the streets at break-neck speed annihilated distance rather than time. He told the driver to take him anywhere he pleased, and leaned back listlessly as he was piloted slowly through the avenues.

Paris, beautiful Paris, always intoxicated Paul. He had not cared for it when he was younger. But in those days he was less cosmopolitan than now. Our insular John Bull sees nothing outside our own tight little island. But to Paul an awakening had come. Since those wonderful weeks he had known in Switzerland and Venice—now long years ago

—he had looked out upon the world with different eyes. The pulsating life of the streets quickened his own blood.

"To the *Bois de Boulogne!*" he directed the *cocher,* finally, and soon they swung into the gay stream that flowed down the *Avenue du Bois de Boulogne* toward the most wonderful pleasure ground in the world.

CHAPTER XIV

PAUL found the *Bois* as beautiful as ever, with its lakes and rippling streams hidden away in the forests. But he was conscious of a feeling of solitude as he rode along among the hundreds upon hundreds of jangling equipages.

All the world was there it seemed to Paul. *Grande dames* there were, with gorgeous footmen on the box; and elegant little victorias containing wonderfully gowned *demoiselles.* Paul recognized one of the latter as a lady who had caused the disruption of a kingdom. There were less conspicuous carriages, too, whose occupants seemed to be having the best time of all—whole families,

there, with father and mother and laughing children.

Suppose the lady were somewhere in that wonderful throng of pleasure-seekers? In what fashion would she drive abroad?

"God knows," he muttered hoarsely to himself, "who or what she may be. Princess or lady's maid, I must find her."

So he rode on through the limitless *Bois,* that wonderful wilderness of green trees and country pleasures, of *fêtes* and promenades.

At last they turned into the *Route de Suresnes,* which soon led them to the *Lac Supérieur.* There Paul dismissed his *cocher,* for he had a fancy to stroll along the borders of the lake.

The banks were alive with boys and girls running about like young savages, to the distraction of their nurses. Paul

threaded his way among them contentedly, for he loved children and had all too little opportunity to be with them. He stood for a time and watched with much amusement a game of blind-man's-buff—*colin-maillard* the little beggars called it, but if the name was different, the play was the same that Paul had known in his own boyhood at Verdayne Place.

Many fine ships were sailing along the lake's shore, navigated by brave mariners of eight and ten. Paul had just turned away from watching one spirited race when a scream arrested his attention. At first he saw only an excited group gathered at the lake's edge, and then his eye caught sight of a tell-tale hat, floating on the surface. With a few bounds he was in the water, to emerge soon with a little limp body in his arms. He laid his burden down gently on the pebbly bank and

then gave place to a man who pushed his way through the crowd with the brisk professional air a doctor is wont to assume. In a few moments the sturdy *enfant* breathed again.

Paul felt anything but a hero. He had never been wetter—and moreover he had lost his hat. It would be a wonder, too, if any *cocher* would let him get into his carriage with the water running off him in rivulets.

He was standing by the road-side bargaining with one of that tribe and had nearly exhausted his stock of dignified French when he happened to glance over his shoulder as a carriage passed close by him. Beneath a parasol a lady's face stood out clearly from the moving maze around him—her face again.

The smile in her eyes made Paul mad.

He thrust a twenty-franc note into the

hand of the astonished *cocher,* and springing into the cab directed the man to hurry on.

And then the impossibility of the situation dawned upon him. A fine sight he was! to go dashing off the Lord knew where after a lady he did not know! Such an adventure attempted by as bedraggled a cavalier as he, might easily land him in a police station. He had no relish for being dragged off by a *gendarme,* he reflected, and even if that should not occur, the best he could possibly manage would be to make an ass of himself. And he had been far too successful in that line once before.

With the thought, his customary sober judgment returned.

"L'Hôtel du Rhin!" he shouted savagely to his *cocher,* and with one last glance at the back of the carriage ahead

(if it were only an automobile!—then there'd be a number on it! he thought) Paul was turned sharply around and carried toward the main entrance to the *Bois.*

Even some hours later, when he was ready to start for the Dalmatian Embassy, his rage had not cooled greatly; it was therefore in a tone strangely at variance with his unruffled evening dress that he directed his chauffeur. As for Baxter, he had never seen his master in so villainous a humour. Indeed, had it not been for an uncommonly pretty *femme de chambre* in the hotel, whose acquaintance he had made the evening before, he would have been tempted to give his employer notice.

"His langwidge was somethink dread-

ful!" he confided to her after Paul had gone.

The pleasant ride through the *Faubourg St. Germain* served to mollify Paul somewhat; and when he walked up to the brilliantly lighted entrance, where a resplendent flunky opened the massive doors for him, he was more himself again. He was soon greeting his host and hostess, whose genuine pleasure at seeing him once more was so evident that the last vestige of Paul's ill-humour vanished before their welcoming smiles.

Presently the Countess turned to Paul and said:

"Come! I want to present you to a young Russian friend of mine whom you are to take in to dinner," and taking his arm she led him into an adjoining room.

And there Paul met his vision, face to face; the lady of his quest.

CHAPTER XV

AT first Paul could hardly believe his senses. He was conscious, as he gazed into the depths of two marvellous eyes, of a tall supple figure all in black, a crimson rose in her dark hair lending a touch of color—that, and her red lips.

This was the face that had burned its lineaments into the tablets of his memory —the face so sweetly known at Lake Lucerne.

The babble of the arriving guests—the strains of the orchestra—became as the faint murmurs of a far off sea.

For Paul, one fact, and only one, existed—it was she—his Lady of the Beauteous Countenance; no vision, but a be-

witching creature of flesh and blood whose gloved hand rested for a moment in his own.

As in a dream Paul heard the lady's name—the same that he had learned at Lucerne—and he felt himself murmuring something—what the words were he scarcely knew.

Not by so much as the quiver of an eyelash did Mademoiselle give sign of recognition, or memory of any previous meeting. She merely smiled as she told Paul that her old friend the Countess had often spoken of him.

His heart was athrob with curious emotions, when he heard the Countess' voice:

"Come! we are going in. You two can become better acquainted at table." And he felt his partner's arm rest lightly within his; its merest touch electrified him.

"Damn the dinner!" Paul swore softly

to himself, for he had no wish to share his good fortune with a roomful of people.

To his great disgust, a silly ass of a young German *attaché,* who sat on the other side of Mademoiselle Vseslavitch, began talking with her as soon as they had reached their places.

When Paul did have her to himself occasionally, she talked to him of England, the last subject he was interested in then. Not for a minute did she allow him an opportunity to lead her in the direction of Langres or Lucerne.

"I have never been across the Channel," she told him. "But I have long wished to go. You English are such a remarkable people—you are all so sane and sensible compared with my own countrymen. What Russian can talk with a woman for five minutes without making violent love to her?—but you cold-

blooded Anglo-Saxons are so refreshingly different."

Paul did not see the mischievous merriment in the lady's eyes. And his gallant answer was interrupted by some inanity from Herr von Mark.

If ever the Anglo-German diplomatic relations were in danger, an observer would have promptly decided that they they were at that instant. That the conceited young German did not immediately expire was only due to the fact that dagger glances cannot cause a fatal wound.

Paul tried to learn more about the lady. Was she to be long in Paris? Really, she could not say. She liked the country so much more than the town that it was always hard for her to stay many days away from the open. She never knew when the whim might seize her to go—to get

aboard a train and hurry to some distant spot which she felt impelled to visit. Who knew? To-morrow, perhaps, might find her on her way to the château of a friend who lived in the Bukowina, near the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains.

"Ah!"—and she turned to Paul with a radiant face that made him long to catch her in his arms—"do you know that wonderful country? Those fissured peaks, with their precipitous and inaccessible crests—their rock-cumbered valleys, concealing deep and lovely lakes? And the beautiful pine-woods creeping down to the foot of the mountains? I could spend all my life in that wonderful place, living in some peasant's hut, if need be."

"Tell me more!" Paul leaned toward her, forgetful now of all else but this divine and fascinating being.

"Ah!" she breathed, "you are a devotee of Nature, too, I know. You are a great traveller,—the Countess has said it," she continued quaintly. "You have been around the whole world. While as for me, I know Europe only, and of course Russia best of all countries. I have seen much of her—those wonderful rolling *steppes,* and rugged mountains. The North Sea, too, for I love the sea as my own soul.

"Often do I feel as though the sea were really in my soul itself. And as in the sea there are hidden water-plants, which only come to the surface at the moment they bloom, and sink again as soon as they fade, so at times do wondrous flower-pictures form in the depths of my soul, and rise up, shed perfume around, and gleam and vanish. . . Then the ships that sail by! As you walk along the

shore, is it not a pretty sight to see them —their great white sails look like stately swans. And still more beautiful is the sight when the setting sun throws great rays of glory round a passing bark."

In silence Paul gazed at her. He hardly breathed, lest some banal word should frighten this wonderful nymph away.

"And then at night,"—she went on dreamily—"what a strange and mysterious sensation the meeting with strange ships at sea produces. You fancy that perhaps your best friends, whom you have not seen for years, are sailing silently by, and that you are losing them forevermore."

Paul was strangely moved. He loved the sea himself, as well as the mountains —his Queen had taught him its call years ago—and he often wandered about the

shore, pondering over the strange old legends with which centuries have wreathed it.

"You are wonderful!" he whispered to the lady. "You're like some water-maiden—and I believe your eyes are a bit of the sea itself!"

"Ah! Now you are like all the rest—French and Russians and Germans! Why spoil my rhapsody with personalities?"

"Forgive me!" Paul looked sufficiently penitent, and Mademoiselle with a playful gesture of absolution spoke again.

"It puts me in a strange and curious mood when I ramble along the shore in the twilight. Behind me are the flat dunes, before me the vast, heaving, immeasurable ocean, and above me the sky like an infinite crystal dome. Then I seem to be a very insect; and yet my soul expands to the size of the world. The

high simplicity of Nature which surrounds me, elevates and oppresses me at the same time, more so than any other scene, however sublime. There never was any cathedral dome vast enough for me."

She stopped short, as if suddenly realizing she had stumbled upon dangerous ground.

And at that moment the Countess picked up the ladies with her eyes and they rose, to leave the men over their cigars. So Paul was left, to be drawn, willy-nilly, into a discussion of an international alliance, which did not interest him in the least.

Later when the men joined the ladies in the *salon,* Paul sought his sprite, but she was careful, or so it seemed, not to be left alone with him. And it was not until he said good-night that he could express to her the wish to see her again.

"You are such an uncertain lady," he said to her, smiling, "so restless within the confines of a town-house, that I hope you will let me call to-morrow—before you suddenly go dashing off to climb some peak, or to visit some foreign coast."

"Come for tea, to-morrow, if you wish." She looked up at him quickly—searchingly, Paul thought—and his blood raced madly through his veins.

Adieus were said, and Paul found himself again in his taximeter cab. In a state of mind quite different from that which had obsessed him on his way to the dinner, he arrived once more at the *hôtel.*

"Ah! these mad English!" Paul's chauffeur said to himself as he pocketed an extravagant *pourboire.* "We see too few of them! Milord Rosbif must have been having some famous old wine over

in the *Faubourg St. Germain,* is it not so?" he asked himself.

But it was the more exalted intoxication of the soul that sent Paul up the steps with the elastic stride of youth.

Who was she? Paul did not know, even now. Mademoiselle Vseslavitch had said nothing of her family or her home. Beyond the fact that she was Russian, and a friend of the Dalmatian Ambassador's wife—herself a Slav—Paul was still ignorant. Indeed, for all he knew, she might be some poor relation—lack of fortune was the only possible reason he could ascribe for her being unmarried. Beautiful and attractive women, of good family—if they were rich—did not wander over the Continent long without husbands. Well—that mattered nothing.

Thank heaven, he was not bound by any necessity of fortune.

Before he switched off his light that night Paul took from one of his boxes a small flat object of red morocco inlaid with gold. He lifted a tiny lid and there, through wide-set and strangely fascinating eyes a lady looked at him. It was the most amazing miniature Paul had ever seen. And the face depicted there with some unknown master's consummate skill —how often had it proved for him the only consolation he could find in the whole world.

His eyes dimmed as they conveyed to him the image of his still beloved *Imperatorskoye*—he pressed the bauble to his lips. Ah! God! the cold glass! How different from her melting kiss!

Not easily did he control his emotions. Of late years he seldom opened the por-

trait because of the almost overwhelming rush of memories it always brought to him.

"There is a strange resemblance," he mused, after he had carried the miniature where the light shone full upon it. Was it the strong predominance of the Russian type which stamped alike the features of his dead Queen and the living lady he had seen that evening? Paul could not tell. He closed the case reluctantly. Never had he expected to see another comparable to his long lost love. Well, he was drifting, perhaps. Who knew?

And yet he felt again, as his hand rested upon the precious casket, that *she* in her wisdom must be cognizant of it all. Indeed, Paul had gone through the years of his manhood with a feeling that her presence was always near to him. The

conviction that had come to him as he had stood in the Cathedral at Langres was too strong to be shaken off. Whatever happened—and Paul meant to win the woman he had that night left in the *Faubourg St. Germain*—he felt sure his Queen had willed it.

Such is the inexplicable influence that the dead sometimes exert. I will not try to tell you more of that now. It would take too long. And I should first have to tell you about many sad things that happened a score of years ago, if you do not know them already. And then I might become melancholy. It is my pleasure instead to tell another story altogether, which is joyful and appropriate. And it is this very story which I mean to tell in this book.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN Paul rang the bell at the Dalmatian Embassy the next afternoon it was with a firm determination to learn more of the Countess's guest. If she would not tell him about herself, then he would find out from the wife of the Ambassador.

The Countess had always warmly welcomed Paul, when Count Oreshefski presided over the legation house in London, and Paul had responded to her motherly interest by opening his heart to a greater extent even than to his own mother, the proud Lady Henrietta. For the Countess had known and loved his Queen—a fact which formed an unalterable bond of sympathy between them.

Paul wandered about the drawing-room, when the footman had departed with his card, too restless—too eager—to be seated. In one of his turns about the room his eyes alighted on an object which instantly arrested his idle steps. It was a woman's photograph, lying on a small table, as though placed there by a careless hand and then forgotten. A tiny object to work such an effect, but it was enough to bring Paul to a round halt.

There, looking up at him from the card, was the face of the woman he had come to see—Mademoiselle Vseslavitch. There was a wistful, touching expression to the pictured face, but it was a remarkably fine likeness, and Paul glowed with secret joy as he hid it away in his breast-pocket, murmuring inaudibly to be for-

given for the theft, but—alas for the cause of honesty—gleefully unrepentant.

He scarcely had time to move from the table, as his ear caught the rustle of approaching silk, when the fair original of the photograph entered, alone, and greeted him cordially.

"I am so sorry!" she said, as she held out her hand toward Paul. "The Countess has been suddenly called to Etampes, where her sister is ill. I am left to do the honours at the tea-table. You won't mind, I hope?"

Paul expressed himself as sorry to learn of the illness of the Countess's sister; he did not know the lady. And he spoke the usual regrets over missing the charming society of the Ambassador's wife. But there was a light in his eye which denied any great grief. As a matter of fact, he

was overjoyed that he would have the Countess's guest to himself.

"Come into the library," said Mademoiselle Vseslavitch, "and we will have the tea things brought in there. It's not too early for you, is it?"

Paul laughed at the idea of its ever being too early for an Englishman's tea. Under pressure of work, when Parliament was sitting, he drank innumerable cups. And even when he was spending his time at Verdayne Place he always had tea ready to drink between sets of tennis.

The Verdayne tea was famous all over the countryside. It was a Russian variety. Paul always steadfastly refused to divulge to anyone—ever the Vicar's wife—the place where he bought it, and he always had it prepared in a Russian *samovar*.

Once in the library, a great sombre room to which an open coal fire lent a cheerful touch, Paul's companion seated herself at a low tea-table and busied herself with the *samovar.*

"This is Russian tea," she said, smiling. "You may not care for it."

"On the contrary," Paul replied, sipping the steaming amber fluid—"I always use this same kind at home. One can't fail to detect the peculiar aromatic flavour which tea retains when it has travelled overland, but which most of the leaves sold in England lose in coming by sea."

"This is my own—which I always carry with me," Mademoiselle Vseslavitch remarked. "We have used no other in our family for many years."

"And where, Mademoiselle, if I may ask, does this highly discriminating fam-

ily reside? Perhaps, in the course of my wanderings there might come a time when it would be a most important matter for me to obtain a cup of this truly remarkable brew."

Mademoiselle Vseslavitch laughed mischievously at Paul. She had motioned him to a chair where the firelight reached his face, whereas her own was more in shadow. He did not see the amusement in her eyes when she replied:

"Oh! You can find tea like that in many houses east of the Balkans. It is really not wonderful at all."

Paul saw that the lady did not care to tell him much of herself, and he did not venture to press her further just then. But now that the Countess was not there to question, he felt that he must make some effort later.

As they sat there the lady talked to him of things in Paris, of the Luxembourg, the Louvre, Nôtre Dame, the boulevards, and then she wickedly mentioned the *Bois de Boulogne.* But Paul did not prove very responsive on that subject. The remembrance of the spectacle he had presented the afternoon before did not please him.

He knew right well that she was teasing him, though she did not mention the incident. He almost wished she would—it might give him an opportunity to say to her the words that he longed to say.

As for Lucerne—or Langres—Mademoiselle nimbly avoided those spots—it was as if they had no place on her map of Europe. And try as he could, Paul could not bring himself to mention them.

At last the ridiculousness of the situation dawned on him. Suppose he should

boldly recall to Mademoiselle the *rencontre* in the rustic tea-house at Lucerne? Clearly, he might commit an unfortunate *faux pas* by such a move. No, he dared not speak to her of an incident so unconventional. He must ignore the fact that he had ever seen her before, unless she herself mentioned it. It was clear that she would demand careful wooing. This was a time when he must keep himself well in hand.

And just as Paul had reached this conclusion something happened—it was but a little thing—that upset all his well-laid plans.

As the lady held out more tea for Paul and he drew near to take it, he caught once more, as at Lucerne, the faintest breath of that strange perfume so dear to his memory. His hand shook with such

sudden agitation that he set the cup upon the table, lest it fall.

The lady looked up quickly at Paul, and as he stood there over her their eyes met fairly. All skillful fencing was over. The time had come when the truth must be told.

"Let us drop the mask, Mademoiselle," he said with a slight choke in his voice. Without warning the thrill of youth had fired his blood and he cast prudence to the four winds. What mattered conventionality? What mattered anything? He only knew that he cared more for her than for all else in the whole world, and he took her hand in his with a tumultuous heart.

"I love you, dear," he said simply. "You yourself are the beautiful lady I have sought constantly since that time I first saw you, as I looked up into the

starry skies. At first I thought your eyes also were stars."

She gazed up at him for a moment, her hand motionless in his, while neither stirred.

"My heart misgives me!" she said then. "Words are so easily said—they are often spoken idly—*pour passer le temps*—and soon forgotten. Ah! Sir Paul! forgive me, I beg of you—if I was mad once. I promise myself it shall never happen again. It was unfortunate—but there are things one cannot explain."

"But I love you," Paul repeated.

"Are you sure it is love?" she asked him.

Ah! how well Paul knew now, and he bent toward the face of his dreams.

"No! no! not that!" she said, and rose from her place. "You don't know what

you do. Please go! go! quickly, for I must be alone."

And then as Paul hesitated for an instant, she fled through the heavy draperies into the room beyond, leaving but a breath of the faint, sweet perfume to hallow the air.

With heart bowed down Paul passed out through the great doorway, the words from an old play ringing through his brain:

"She was lovable, and he loved her; but he was not lovable, and she loved him not."

CHAPTER XVII

WITH the many details of the evening that Paul spent, I will not weary you, dear reader. Wandering about the boulevards he went, like one walking in a dream, at times stopping to rest at some quiet table apart from the throng of merry-makers, entirely disregardful of the laughing faces, the friendly glances that now and then searched him out. Like a canker worm misery gnawed at his heart.

He stopped at a cable office and despatched to his mother, the Lady Henrietta, a message which, though she knew it not, was pregnant with meaning.

"Delayed indefinitely in Paris."

Paul wondered afterward, as he sat quietly sipping his coffee in a small *café,* that in the little breast of one mortal there could be such room for infinite wretchedness. Within his heart that night was nothing but darkness and pain. He felt as though his very heart was breaking and bleeding. The sweat lay cold upon his brow and he sighed deeply.

Alas it was all true. He loved her, though she loved him not; he gave her all, and she gave him nothing; and yet he could not part from her. He could not help his unlucky passion.

Contrary to his wont, he did not, as he sat alone, dream his way back into the past. He looked rather into the mystic haze of the future, and heard not the confused sound of the voices of men and women, nor the gay music which filled the place.

Paul, after all, was no seer. As to what the outcome would be, all the dreaming he might do would tell him nothing. He rose and proceeded to his *hôtel.*

But to return for a moment to the source of Paul's unhappiness. He might not have been so wretched as he sat in the little *café* could he have seen her in her boudoir, now weeping with wild uncontrollable sobs, now smiling radiantly through her tears.

For Mademoiselle Natalie Vseslavitch was at once the happiest and the most miserable of women. She had taken advantage of the privilege of her sex when she feigned to doubt Paul's fervent declaration that afternoon. She *did* believe him. Her keen feminine instinct told her that his simple "I love you" were

not the idle words she pretended to think them.

And yet with the joy of being loved by the one who was the dearest to her own heart came also the crushing remembrance of the dreadful barrier by which she was forever shut from happiness. However, the indomitable will of her proud ancestry finally asserted itself. She sat down at her dainty writing table, and in a steady hand she wrote:

"I am going away to-morrow, and I may never see you again. When this reaches you I shall be gone. Whether we meet again sometime will depend upon many things. As for those which concern me, I cannot write you now. And you? Can you not imagine obstacles for yourself? Has it not occurred to you, even now, that I—a strange woman—may be many things you had not, at first, dreamed

of? There are those, as you must surely know, whose business it is to roam about the centers of Europe. And for what purpose? None know their missions, or what master they may serve, except the one whose will they implicitly obey. You have told me that you love me. Are you sure, my friend, that that would not all be changed if I were some one—something—that I seemed not? Think well over this, I pray you. It may mean much to me.

"Meanwhile do not try to find me, for I shall be hidden far away. Some day, perhaps, you may know all."

When Paul received this letter the following morning it was almost more than he could bear. How could she have misjudged him so! A longing seized him to find her—in spite of her charge. The situation was unendurable—he must seek her out and convince her that it was she

herself alone that mattered. What was position to him? He had position. He was endowed with worldly goods. And he could marry whom he chose. He looked at the note again.

What could she mean?

Ah! he had it! She was a secret agent—there was no doubt—working probably in the service of the Dalmatian government. Well, for all that Paul cared nothing. The only course of action open to him was to follow her, to the ends of the world, if need be.

He would convince her—she *must* be convinced—and then, he hoped, all would be well. She cared for him, somewhat—the tone of the letter seemed to show that—though she tried to conceal it, evidently. The Countess was expected back that day—he would seek her help.

Paul wasted no time. Another hour

found him at the Dalmatian Embassy, face to face with the Countess Oreshefski, who was instantly all sympathy as she noted his agitation.

"My dear lady," he said to her, "you will not think it strange, I hope, if I ask your help in a matter of great importance to me?"

"What is it, Sir Paul? You know that if I can be of assistance to you in any way it will make me only too happy." And the Countess regarded him with a tender look.

Paul had a strange attraction for women, as I have said, and this fine woman, having lost her only son—Paul's own age—many years before, had always felt a mother's interest in him.

"You are very kind," Paul continued, "and I will be quite frank with you. I shall have to presume upon your good na-

ture to ask your advice and help once more. To come to the point at once: Yesterday, here in your house, I told Mademoiselle Vseslavitch that I loved her. To-day she is gone,—where I do not know." Paul looked at his companion with appealing eyes.

"My dear friend!" the Countess exclaimed, with truly feminine irrelevancy, "I am delighted. I would not be a woman if I were not always ready to enlist in the cause of a lover. And as for helping you, I would do anything for Sir Paul Verdayne which lay in my power. You want to find her at once?" she asked him.

"Yes, Madame."

"Then you are going to Russia—to-day, if I read your face rightly. Well, it is a long journey. I will tell you in two words where to find her—near Kieff. Go

to that city; from there a ride of some fifty miles across country awaits you—to the Vseslavitch estate. Everyone in Kieff knows the place. You will have no great difficulty finding it—beyond the inevitable discomforts of travel in that corner of the world. But what are hardships to a man in love?" And she smiled at Paul in a manner so infectious that he already felt his spirits rising.

"You are too kind, my dear lady!" he exclaimed. "You are a real fairy-god-mother. See, with your magic wand you have touched the mountain in my path—and it is gone. And now, god-mother," he said, almost gaily, "tell me—who is this beautiful lady?"

"Ah! that you must learn from her own lips. Simply Mademoiselle Vseslavitch she must be to you until she wills it otherwise." She laughed as she read the sud-

den disappointment written on Paul's face.

"You remember the old tale of the knight whose kiss transformed the beggar-maid into a king's daughter? Some such method I would suggest, perhaps."

"But I've tried that already!" Paul almost said. But he caught himself in the nick of time.

"How can I ever thank you enough?" he said as he rose to go. "You saw Mademoiselle yourself before she went?" he asked.

"No. She left hurriedly this morning, very early, before my return. My maid told me that she had gone back to her home."

With grateful words Paul made his adieu and hurried away. The door had scarcely closed behind him when a footman entered the morning-room. In his

hand he carried a small tray—and on it there lay a letter.

"A note which Mademoiselle Vseslavitch directed me to give you, Madame," he said.

The Countess opened it.

"DEAR LADY:

"I am going home. Forgive my seeming rudeness. You know my moods too well, I think, not to understand that I have suddenly felt the call of the *steppe*. And I charge you, my old friend, as you love me, tell no one of my whereabouts. Ever your devoted

"NATALIE."

That was all.

"This note, François—why was it not given me before?" she asked the footman sharply.

"Ah, pardon Madame—they did not

tell me you had returned until just now. And Mademoiselle charged me to deliver it to you with my own hands."

The Countess motioned him away. Had she been indiscreet to take Sir Paul so quickly into her confidence? It was still not too late, probably, for a messenger to catch him at the *Hôtel du Rhin* before he left. He was too much a gentleman, she knew, not to consider as unsaid the information she had given him, if she asked it of him.

"Pouf!" she exclaimed, with a shrug. "This is but the whim of a girl who does not know her own mind. Come—I will be a consistent fatalist. The affair is out of my hands. After all, it is just what I have long wished—though I never dreamed for such good fortune as that it would be Sir Paul Verdayne. She'll simply have to forgive me"—and the

Countess smilingly hummed an old Dalmatian love-song as she left the room.

Meanwhile, Paul paced the floor of his sitting-room impatiently while Baxter packed his luggage. A strange exultation moved him, and he dreamt of joy and love. To him, his dreams were more than mere bubbles—before his eyes lay all the glory of the earth, and a whole Heaven besides. Ah! if the good godmother could only have endowed him with seven-leagued boots! He could scarcely wait for the long journey to be finished. And it had not yet begun.

"Hurry, Baxter!" he called, as he looked again at his watch. And Baxter, thinking of the pretty *femme de chambre,* once more was tempted to give notice.

CHAPTER XVIII

ON and on, during long days and restless nights, our Don Quixote journeyed—for was not Paul like that noble knight, endeavouring to recall a long dead past unto life? After all, there was only one Dulcinea del Tobosa —and she was still, and ever would be, the most beautiful woman in the world.

One morning, at length, Paul awakened from a troublous sleep. The train had stopped, and looking out of the window in the early mist he saw some strange figures standing by the side of the track—bearded men, mostly, with brilliant scarlet shirts, and trousers tucked into huge clumsy boots—some of them half-covered with long white aprons. He recog-

nized these gentry as customs officials and porters. At last he had reached the Russian frontier!

He dressed quickly, eager, for the first time in his life, to have his baggage examined and his passports inspected. Usually Paul regarded such performances as a violation of the Heaven-sent rights of an Englishman to wander unmolested over the face of the earth. But now—once the ceremony was over—it meant that he was one step nearer the goal.

Having satisfied the zealous subjects of the Tsar that he was neither a Nihilist nor a Jew, and that his luggage contained no high explosives, nor other contraband goods, Paul's history was carefully written down in a leather covered book, and he was granted the right as an English gentleman to seek amusement where he

would throughout the domains of the Little Father at St. Petersburg.

The other passengers having in their turn been duly examined, the train at last moved on, to drag itself monotonously for hour after hour through countless cornfields and stretches of forest. At last —and Paul had begun to think the time would never come—he stepped down and stretched his tired muscles in the railway station at Warsaw. The prospect of a good hotel, with a tub, a well-served dinner and a real bed once more, Paul considered for a moment. But no! he would push on at once. He could rest at his journey's end—this was no time to look after the comfort of his body; the cry of his soul must first be satisfied.

And after a brief delay he found himself again *en route*.

On his travels in out-of-the-way cor-

ners of the globe, Paul had long ago accustomed himself to discomfort—even hardship. But he shuddered as he thought of his dainty lady being subjected to the vicissitudes of a long trip on those primitive Russian railways. For two days and a night, in a heaving, swaying train, in a carriage full of reeking people smoking rancid tobacco, he was forced to curb his eagerness. As the time of his arrival drew nearer Paul found it all the more difficult to endure the delay.

It seemed as if the end would never come. The country was almost all forest now and more bleak and mournful than any Paul had ever seen. The innumerable willow trees, with their branches drooping to earth as if they, of all living things, denied the joys of spring, exerted on him a strangely depressing influence.

But finally, to Paul's relief, the country

became more open, and at last, as the train rolled along the edge of a clear upland, Paul saw the sheen of the glorious Dnieper, a silver thread beyond which rose a low range of brown hills covered with woods. And soon he made out the spires and domes of Kieff.

A little while longer—and then with a long-drawn sigh of satisfaction he felt the firm earth under foot once more. Kieff at last! Paul could scarcely believe it.

Into one of the open vans that meet the weary traveller Paul climbed, and rode across the hills to the fashionable quarter of the town. The Grand Hotel, he found, was very comfortable, and he retired that night in a calmer frame of mind than he had known since he left Paris.

For he felt that he was on the threshold.

From Kieff Paul proceeded the next morning, accompanied by his faithful Baxter, who held in true British contempt the "houtlandish Russians," and grumbled far more than he was wont as he stowed into the *droskie* such necessities as a week's absence required. But Paul's eagerness proved infectious, and before the sun had arisen they were far on their way.

It seemed a bit unconventional to Paul's English mind to appear at a lady's house without an invitation—even warning of his coming. But there was nothing for it—it was the only course that offered. Those living in Russian country-houses, he knew, were used to entertaining such travellers as came their way unbidden. In sparsely settled districts, where there were not even wretched inns for shelter,

it was a custom that had come about quite naturally.

Paul had never been in that part of Russia before, and it was with more than passing interest that he observed the scenes around him. At first he could not understand the passion which he knew Mademoiselle Vseslavitch felt for her own country, for near Kieff the land was sterile—the scenery somewhat uneventful. But as the leagues put themselves between him and the town the aspect of the landscape changed. It was early Summer or late Spring then, you remember, and after some hours Paul found himself driven through luxuriant vegetation. As his eye traversed the great billows of the grassy sea he saw that one might easily become lost in the verdure. And yet what glorious reward awaited the bold adventurer! Somewhere, beyond

this emerald ocean, waited the lady he sought.

At midday they stopped before a peasant's hut, in the doorway of which a *moujik* stood, wrapped in sheepskin and with long and shaggy hair and beard.

"Good-day, brother; how goes it?" asked Paul, for he knew a little of the language.

"Good-day, little father; thank God, it goes well with me," the man answered. "What is your pleasure? How can I serve you?" and his face unbent with a welcoming smile.

"A little food, brother, if you will," Paul replied, "for we have come many leagues."

The *moujik* made sign for Paul and his men to enter, and soon at a rude table they were eating black bread and drinking *kvass*.

Fresh from the *cafés* of Paris, Paul delighted in this primitive simplicity. The transition from the boulevards to the *steppe* was most refreshing. When after a short rest they were ready to start on again, Paul would have the man accept money for their entertainment. But the peasant waved the coin away.

"To take payment for the bread and salt which a passing stranger consumes in thy dwelling is a great sin," he said. "I am happy to have served thee."

CHAPTER XIX

ONCE more on the road, the driver urged on his horses, already tired. The country was fast becoming rougher, and more wooded, and now and then Paul caught sight of hills in the distance. As the afternoon wore on he saw that they would be fortunate if night-fall did not overtake them before they arrived at their destination. The road was full of deep ruts—at some stages almost impassable—and when, just as darkness was close upon them, they came upon a large and comfortable appearing house—evidently the home of some great landed proprietor—Paul told the driver to turn in.

The house showed little sign of any life about it until two great wolf-hounds came bounding out and barked loudly at the travellers. Then a servant appeared at the door, and bidding the dogs begone, asked Paul to alight and enter, directing Baxter and the driver to the court-yard in the rear.

The man-servant led Paul through a dark hall into a great drawing-room. As he entered the room a woman laid down a book and rose. She must in her time have been uncommonly beautiful, Paul thought. She was beautiful even now, though her eyes were very tired and her face when in repose was hard and set. Her hair would have at once aroused suspicion that it was dyed, for it was lustrous and brilliant as burnished copper. But the suspicion would have been without justification, in the same way as would

have been the notion that the very pronounced colour on the woman's cheeks was artificial too.

She seemed to hesitate a little, and just as Paul was about to crave pardon for his unceremonious intrusion (the servant had merely opened the door for him and he had entered unannounced) a man, dressed, like Paul, in ordinary tweeds, stepped quickly out of the darkness into the rays of the candelabra.

For a moment he gazed at Paul with curiosity without addressing him. Paul saw a man with an olive face set with dark, almond-shaped eyes beneath a pair of oblique and finely-pencilled brows; his nose was aquiline and assertive, his mouth shrewd and mean and scarcely hidden by a carefully-trained and very faintly-waxed moustache. He was ex-

ceedingly tall and astonishingly spare in build.

"Ah, a traveller, I see," the Russian said at length in careful English. "You are most welcome, I assure you, sir. We are delighted to have your company. It is a pleasure which seldom comes to us in this lonely spot. My name," he added, stretching out his hand to Paul, "is Boris Ivanovitch, and this lady," turning to his companion, "is—my sister."

Paul bowed to the red-haired woman.

"Aldringham is my name," he said, as he grasped the gentleman's outstretched hand. He did not like the look in the heavy-lidded eyes of his host, and some quick instinct prevented him from giving his own name—so he fell back upon that of his mother's family.

And now a third occupant of the house

entered—a tall young man of the most unpleasant appearance.

"My cousin Michael," said Ivanovitch in an even voice, "Michael, this is Mr. Aldringham, an English traveller."

The newcomer had very light blue eyes, closely set together, and a large, red, hawk-like nose. His hands too were large and red, with immense knuckles and brutal, short, stubbed nails. Paul took one of the huge red hands with a barely repressed shudder. It was cold and clammy and strong as a vise.

"If ever," thought the baronet to himself, "I have touched the hand of a murderer, I have touched one now."

The tall young man sat down presently and carefully watched Paul with his narrow, light blue eyes, which glinted and flashed all over Paul's face. Boris Ivanovitch looked at him sidelong. The red-

haired woman alone gazed at him openly and frankly with eyes that were almost honestly blue.

There was a little pause while conversation hung fire. There was nothing for this curious collection of human beings to talk about except the traveller himself, and on this subject their tongues had to be silent as long as he remained.

Suddenly the door opened, and a portly man with a sallow, greasy face came quickly in. He stood still, with his hand on the panel of the door, and gave a short, quick gasp which caused Paul to look at him sharply. That form struck Paul as strangely familiar.

The fat man closed the door behind him gently, and came into the centre of the room.

"Mr. Aldringham," said Ivanovitch,

"allow me to present Monsieur Virot, who acts as manager of our estates."

The Frenchman's sallow and greasy countenance broke into a hideously affable smile as Paul shook hands with him.

The pause which followed this introduction became so embarrassing that the lady suggested that they go in to tea; and in a cheerful dining-room Paul found himself looking curiously at the collection of tea and coffee pots, *vodka* decanters, bacon and eggs, and muffins and cakes, which were spread promiscuously on the clean white tablecloth.

The conversation turned on many things, but for the most part upon the weather. Paul's host finished before the rest, and, pleading business, begged to be excused, and left the room.

When the others of the odd little party had eaten and drunk their fill of the

heterogeneous meal they returned to the drawing-room and Paul saw before him a most uncomfortable evening. "A strangely assorted company," he thought, "to find here in this far-away spot." Clearly, they were all people of the world, and yet there seemed a curious restraint upon them. Paul guessed, somehow, that it was because of his presence.

"I trust that you will pardon me, Mademoiselle, "and he turned to the lady —"but I have travelled all the way from Kieff to-day, and to-morrow morning I must rise early to go on my way to the Vseslavitch estate. I would prove but a dull companion at dinner, I am afraid. If you will permit me, I think I had better go up to my room."

There was no dissent to Paul's suggestion. In fact, Cousin Michael smiled

slightly behind one of his great red hands as if in approval of the idea.

So, to the evident relief of all, Paul said good-night. He was glad to escape from his strange companions.

CHAPTER XX

HEARING the sound of lightly-falling footsteps behind him, Boris Ivanovitch ceased his investigations of Sir Paul's kit-bag and cautiously turned his head.

As he did so, he experienced a painful sensation. He felt a little cold ring of steel pressed against his right temple, and from past experience, both objective and subjective, he knew that a Colt cartridge was held, so to speak, in leash within five inches of his head.

For several infinitely long seconds Boris did not entirely revel in the pause that followed.

It was, indeed, with some relief that he heard Paul's distinctly pleasant,

though slightly mocking, voice break the accentuated silence and say:

"Don't be alarmed, Ivanovitch. I mean you no harm. I am simply psychologically interested in your movements. The fact that I am attempting to protect the contents of my kit-bag from your attentions is of comparatively small importance."

Boris drew a little breath of relief, not the less sincere because he was conscious that the muzzle of the revolver was withdrawn from his temple.

He heard the door of the chamber close softly; then the pleasant voice spoke again, though with a slightly harder ring in its tones.

"Stand up, Ivanovitch," said the voice, "and be seated. I have a good deal to say, and it is not my habit to talk to any man when I find him on his knees."

Boris rose a little unsteadily and faced about, to find the most disconcerting eyes of Sir Paul bent full upon him.

Still retaining the revolver in his hand, the baronet seated himself upon the edge of his bed and then motioned to his host to sit down upon a chair.

For a few minutes the two men gazed at each other with curiosity and interest. Swiftly, however, it came to Paul that a man in Boris's apparent position was not likely to be engaged in theft. There sprang into his brain the notion that the man was simply searching through his belongings with the idea of blackmail.

It almost made Paul laugh to think that any man should attempt to blackmail him. He had nothing to disguise, nothing to hide.

Indeed, as he sat easily on the edge of the bed, looking at the dark, disconcerted

face before him, he had half a mind to throw his weapon aside and to tell Ivanovitch to go his way in peace.

"What did you find?" Paul asked.

Boris did not even blink his heavy-lidded eyes.

"Nothing," he said.

"Yet," rejoined Paul, almost meditatively, "you must have been here some minutes at least before I arrived."

"I tell you," said Boris, almost earnestly, "that I found nothing."

"That is to say," said Paul, "nothing which you could turn to your own good account."

Boris smiled a sour yet demure little smile.

"Precisely," he said evenly.

"Permit me," said the baronet, just as quietly, "to inform you that you are a liar. I think you will be able to hand

me something that is of interest to us both."

"I was not aware that I could," replied Boris, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

Paul picked up again the six-shooter which he had laid carelessly at his side.

"Try," he said, and his voice was gently persuasive.

Just a flicker of vindictiveness crept into Boris' eyes, and under the suasion of firearms he turned again to the bag.

After a few moments Paul, now schooled to infinite placidity, inquired for the second time if he had found anything.

"Only a few papers," said Boris, crossly.

"Pardon me," said the baronet, "if I am not mistaken you have found something

that seems of interest to you. Be kind enough to hand it to me."

The Russian turned about, and with a carefully-manicured hand offered Paul a photograph which Paul had seen protruding from his pocket.

Paul took it and looked at it casually, though the muscles on his closed jaws stood out in a manner that was not wholly pleasant to look upon. It was, however, with unfathomable eyes that he surveyed the portrait before him.

The photograph revealed the features of a girl with an astonishingly quiet face. Her cheeks were round and soft, and her chin was round and soft, too, but her mouth, a little full and pronounced, was distinctly sad and set. A pair of large eyes looked out upon the world unwaveringly and serenely, if a little sorrowfully, beneath a pair of fine-

ly pencilled, level brows, which formed, as it were, a little bar of inflexible resolve. A mass of dark hair was coiled upon the girl's head after the manner of early Victorian heroines. It was a face at once striking and wistful in its splendour.

Paul looked up from the picture to Ivanovitch.

"You," he said simply, "know everybody hereabouts. Therefore I feel confident that you will be able to tell me the name of this girl. That is all I ask you—at present."

Boris laughed and then checked his laughter.

"The lady," he said, "is Mademoiselle Vseslavitch, who, as you are probably aware, lives no great distance away."

"So!" murmured Paul, and he nodded his head.

"Yes," said Boris, "and if it is of any

interest to you to know it, I propose to marry the lady."

"Indeed!" said Paul.

He placed the picture carefully in his breast-pocket.

"You must forgive my being rude," he added, "but I should not now be in this country if I had not every intention of marrying the lady myself."

Boris was a man used to being hard hit. He was steeled against cunningly and swiftly-dealt blows, such as he himself administered, but this declaration of Sir Paul's, that he intended to marry Mademoiselle Vseslavitch, took him quite back.

"Oh!" he exclaimed softly, and his voice had a certain note of surprise in it.

The baronet smiled a little grimly, but his eyes were as serene and as cold as ever.

Boris's "Oh!" had told him much.

He realized that he had dealt his host an exceedingly well-landed blow. Then the baronet's smile died, for, following the train of his suspicious thoughts, he instinctively grasped and held on to the idea that just as Boris had been searching his kit-bag for the purpose of blackmail, so that individual purposed marriage with Mademoiselle Vseslavitch to the same end.

This notion disquieted him greatly.

It disturbed him so much that the hard eyes hardened. Only the baronet's friends knew that they sometimes hardened because of the softness behind their gaze.

Paul's heart, indeed, rose in revolt against the suggestion that this man should for a moment presume to reach out and touch the hand of Mademoiselle Vseslavitch. Not for such a man as Boris was the girl with the calm yet, at

the same time, troubled eyes, that had looked out from the picture.

Paul made a shrewd guess that if Boris had his hopes set on her, the girl with the dark hair and steadfast eyes stood in some peril.

The mere thought of it quickened his blood, and the quickening of his blood livened his brain still more, so that he watched, almost cat-like, the glance of Boris's eyes as they followed the placing of the lady's picture in Paul's pocket.

For a couple of minutes nothing was said. Each man knew instinctively that he must move to the attack, but realized that a mistake at the opening of the game might possibly spell disaster.

It was the baronet who broke the silence.

"No man, except one such as you," he said, "would dream of regarding Made-

moiselle Vseslavitch as a possible wife unless he were so equipped with all the arts of blackmail that he had some reason to hope for his success."

By this time Boris had got back his composure.

"You seem," he said casually, "to endow me with an exceedingly poor character."

"Not exactly," said Paul. "I endow you with an exceedingly dangerous one."

There was another pause, and the two pairs of eyes sought each other, and the heavy-lidded, slumberous eyes of Boris flickered and faltered beneath those of Paul.

"I am about to present to you an argument," continued the baronet, "which unswervingly follows my present conception. Long experience of this wicked world—by which I mean that particular

kind of vulture-like humanity which preys upon better men than itself—enables me to assume that you are without question a blackmailer, a bad blackmailer, and a blackmailer of no common type.

"But I have also learnt this, that no blackmailer can stand alone. His offence is the most cowardly offence in the world. A blackmailer is always a coward, and a coward is invariably afraid of isolated action. I am therefore very certain that you do not stand alone in this attempt."

It had come upon Paul suddenly that this man was connected in some way with the scene he had witnessed at Lucerne—that he was the one for whom the fat man had acted as agent. And then, in a flash, he recalled the name "Boris" which Mademoiselle Vseslavitch had spoken; at that moment, too, Paul placed the per-

sonality of the Frenchman Virot. He and the fat man of Lucerne were one.

Boris's eyes left those of Paul and studied the panel behind the baronet's head.

"I should say," Paul continued, "that you were the headpiece, the brain-piece, of a well-planned scheme of crime."

The faint colour in Boris's face became fainter still. Paul believed he was pursuing the right trail.

"Now with such men as yourself—mind, I am not speaking so much from knowledge as from an intuition as to what I should do myself were I placed in similar circumstances—it is probable that you have sufficient intelligence, not only to rob your victims, but to rob your friends.

"Another piece of life's philosophy that roughing it has taught me is that the

robber is always poor. I come, therefore, to the natural deduction that you are hard up."

Paul's whole expression of face changed suddenly. The coldness left it. And his keen eyes smiled with a smile that invited confidence from the man before him.

"Well?" said Boris. "And what of it?"

"Then," Paul continued coolly, "such a sum as two hundred thousand roubles would not come amiss to you. Such a sum I am prepared to pay you—under certain conditions."

All the pleasantness in Paul's face vanished again, and he looked at Boris with narrowed eyes.

"You realize that in my offering you such a sum," he said, "it will, of course, cost you something to earn it. A man who speculates must spend his own money to

gain other people's. A criminal—you must forgive the word, but it is necessary —who seeks to make a great *coup* at the expense of others must put up a certain amount of money to bring it off.

"I think, however, that I am offering you quite enough to enable you to buy either the silence or the inactivity of your fellow criminals. Two hundred thousand roubles is a good deal of money, and your gang cannot be so large that you will not be able to afford a sufficient sum to render them your servants."

"Have a care," cried Boris, angrily, at last; "you don't know what you say."

"What do you mean?" demanded Paul.

"I mean," said Boris, "that I do not propose to be insulted any longer in my own house. Your offer of money is an affront which you will pay well for." He

looked thoughtfully away for a few moments; then he turned sharply.

"I will be perfectly frank with you," he said with an amazingly good attempt at breezy honesty. "All of my friends are not particularly nice people, and if they had any idea that you were objectionable to me, not even the consideration of tapping your vast wealth would restrain them from putting you out of the way."

"There is such a thing," said Paul, lightly, "as killing the goose which lays the golden eggs."

"Yes," replied Boris, gravely, "but even a supply of golden eggs may be retained at too dear a price.

"However," he went on with an air of gaiety, "this is rather too serious a matter to consider to-night. I simply intended to throw out a kindly hint."

"I'm sure you are very good," said Paul, with a fine sarcasm. "I had not looked to you for such consideration."

Boris laughed, showing his fine teeth, and gave Paul a quizzical look.

"Don't you think," he began softly, "that you had better turn back and retrace your steps to-morrow?"

Paul looked at him scornfully.

"Do you think I have set out on this errand to be turned back by you?" he said to Boris.

"I suppose," Paul cried, with a certain tone of irony in his voice, "that you think I am a mere society butterfly. What do you think I care for all the scented drawing-rooms in the world, for polo, for Hurlingham, for a stuffy reception in some great house in town? Nothing—nothing! Give me the open prairie land, the tall, brown grass, the open sky, the

joy of the weary body that has ridden hard all the day!"

He laughed shortly.

"Do you think," he continued to the astonished Boris, "that there is any soft, silk-bound pillow in Mayfair that could appeal to me when I could sleep under the stars?

"Heavens!" He reached out his arms and brought them to his sides again with a strenuous motion, all his muscles contracted. "I have learnt," he cried, "the lesson that life is not only real and earnest, but that life is hard, that life is a battle—a battle to be won!"

His eyes fell upon his strong, sinewy, brown hands, and he clenched his fists.

"I am not going back to England. I am going on—to win that girl of the picture—from you!"

Boris regarded him pleasantly.

"It seems," he said, "that you are not in a very good humour this evening."

"My humour suits me very well," answered Paul. He rose and walked over to the door, and held it open.

"For the present," he said, "you may go, but if I were you I would be careful how I indulged in any villainy."

Boris laughed lightly as he paused in the doorway.

"I am still thinking of Mademoiselle Vseslavitch," he said.

"Then you make a vast mistake," Paul answered. "She is not for you."

"We shall see what we shall see," tauntingly replied Boris, as he closed the door behind him.

But his remarks did not prevent Paul, when he retired, from promptly going to sleep.

CHAPTER XXI

DURING the night Paul was awakened—for a moment he thought he heard the sound of some struggle in the hall outside his door, and the sound of excited whispers. Then a woman's voice, in low, forceful tones, penetrated the stillness, and Paul heard distinctly:

"Come away, for God's sake!"

Then all was still.

Verdayne was no coward—but his fingers closed instinctively on the butt of the revolver that he had placed within easy reach. Puzzled, he lay awake for a time in the darkness, but finally nothing further happening, he fell asleep once more.

When he awoke the grey dawn was

creeping into his windows and he rose immediately, anxious to escape the eerie atmosphere of the house, and begin the final stage of his journey. What an uncanny lot these Russian beggars were, to be sure.

He determined to leave as unceremoniously as he had come, and wrote a hasty note which he placed upon his dresser where it could easily be seen. As he stole quietly down the long hall, in an attempt not to awaken the household, he came suddenly upon Mademoiselle Ivanovitch seated in a chair drawn into a windowed recess. She started as he came upon her, but instantly recovered her calm poise of the evening before.

Paul apologized for the stealthy manner of his leave-taking, pleading the necessity of an early start.

She listened to him patiently, then

glancing over her shoulder to see that she was not observed, "Forgive my being so blunt," she said, "but I think you are playing an exceedingly dangerous game. You have nothing to gain and everything to lose."

Paul turned to her almost sharply and said: "Are you sure that I have nothing to gain?"

She looked at him quickly, and her eyes were startled; the brilliant colour had left her face. Then she caught the baronet by the coat.

"Sir Paul," she cried in a low voice, "you are a young man. Do not destroy your life for a piece of folly. Cut yourself adrift from this while there is still time. Turn back, and never come to this wicked country again."

Paul took her hand and looked at her kindly. "Thank you, thank you very

much. But I am moved to go, my dear lady," he said.

She made no answer to Paul's calmly voiced determination, save a despairing gesture, then turned silently away, and Paul, after a moment, continued on his quiet departure. The faithful Baxter had roused the driver in good season and was waiting at the steps as Paul emerged from the door. If he, too, had had an interruption in his slumbers, he gave no sign.

The driver, with an awkward jerk of his head, which Paul interpreted as a salutation, whipped up the horses, and once more they were on their way.

Not till Paul had ridden some distance did it strike him that the lady of the copper coloured hair had used his real name.

"The devil!" he said aloud, "how could she have known me?" But rack his mem-

ory as he would, he could not recall ever having seen her before.

What did she mean anyhow, with her words of ill-omen? He could not guess. It was all a mystery.

Paul was scarcely in a happy frame of mind that day. He liked to see his difficulties plain before him rather than to be hemmed about with mysteries that he could not understand. And difficulty seemed to be piling itself upon difficulty.

Much, of course, remained to be explained. He was not sure of the different parts which the weirdly associated people whom he had met that afternoon played in Boris's game. The young man Michael, with the large, cruel, red hands, was probably Boris's principal striking force in times of trouble. Boris himself, he imagined, furnished the brains.

But what of the red-haired woman?

That she had her part allotted to her in the strange drama unfolding itself Paul could not doubt. But what part?

Paul hardly believed that she was really Boris's sister.

But what tie bound her to him? What tie kept her within the confines of this strange collection of human beings?

For a moment Paul's heart grew light within him. Was she his wife? If he could but establish that, then Boris's boast that he would marry Mademoiselle Vseslavitch was vain indeed.

Sir Paul was, indeed, confronted by a very Gordian knot of problems. He laughed a little as he made the simile to himself, until he reflected that he was not an Alexander armed with a sword who could disperse the problems at one blow. His, indeed, would be the laborious task of unravelling them one by one; nor

could he see any better way than by beginning at the very beginning, which, so far as he was concerned, meant a full knowledge of Boris's intimates and surroundings.

Not indeed till his guide turned and told him, some hours later, that they were nearing the Vseslavitch house did Paul put the matter out of his mind, and then, as they swung into a long avenue bordered with pines, his thoughts were all for the lady whom he sought.

The house was a very old one, built of stone and massive oaken timbers which showed the ravages of many years.

Paul gazed almost affectionately at the rambling mansion as it disclosed itself to his eager eyes—for did it not shelter the one who was for him the dearest lady in the whole world?

The door opened quickly in answer to

his knock and Paul found himself in a great hall furnished with a lavishness which surprised him, in such an out of the way corner of the world. On the lofty walls hung priceless old engravings, and paintings on silk, with marvellous needlework cunningly aiding the artist's brush. Paul had seen such ancient works of art in the great Continental museums —but never a collection like this. Bear-skin rugs lay strewn about the floor, and as he warmed himself at the huge porcelain stove—for it was a cool morning—he admired them with all the enthusiasm of an ardent sportsman.

He turned, as a door opened at the further end of the room, and there at last stood his dear lady. With quick strides Paul reached her and pressed her hand to his lips. She made no objection to his salutation—perhaps that custom was too

prevalent in her own country to bear much significance.

As she first gazed at him a glad smile lighted her face—and then she grew quite sober.

"Ah!" she said, "you have disobeyed. How could you?"

"Dear lady," answered Paul, "you imposed on me the only command I could not follow. Surely I may be forgiven, I hope, for entering the Promised Land?"

She smiled at him—almost sadly, Paul thought, and then she said, with a far-off look in her wonderful yes, as if she forgot his presence for the moment—

"It is passing strange—that events should take this turn—that you should have come at this time. There are, I know now, divinities that shape our ends." And then she turned to Paul and said quickly:

"What madness has brought you here? My friend, believe me, you should never have followed me. This one day you may stay—because I'm weak—and then, I beg of you, go while there is yet time."

The strange iteration of his earlier warning made Paul wonder.

"Tell me," he cried, as he looked searchingly into her face, "what hidden meaning lies beneath your words? And those of the red-haired woman at the home of Boris Ivanovitch?" And he repeated to her the other's warning—almost identical with hers.

"Oh!" she gasped, and grew quite white, "you did not stay at that house? And yet you are here? Thank God for that." Then, though Paul pressed her, she would say no more.

"Come," she said after a brief pause, "my brother is in the library. You must

know him." And she led the way through a short passage to a room beyond.

A handsome man of about thirty-five, who resembled Mademoiselle strikingly, rose as they entered.

"Peter," she said, "this gentleman is Sir Paul Verdayne. He is an old friend of the Countess Oreshefski. I met him at her house in Paris. Sir Paul will be our guest—until to-morrow," she added.

The young man grasped Paul's hand warmly.

"A friend of the good Countess is most welcome," he exclaimed. "I am only sorry that your stay is to be so short."

Clearly, Mademoiselle was determined that Paul should not remain with them long.

"Will you pardon me, Sir Paul," the young man continued, "if I leave you on my sister's hands for the moment? Our

overseer wishes to see me on a matter of some importance and I shall not be free until luncheon."

While he was speaking a large man entered—a wonderfully fine specimen of Russian manhood. As he stood there, proud but respectful, his flaming red beard falling over his broad chest, he looked like some Viking who had just stepped out of an old myth.

"Alexander Andrieff, our overseer," Peter explained, and the man bowed low to Paul.

"And now, Natalie, if you will entertain Sir Paul for the next hour he will perhaps overlook my rudeness."

"Not at all, sir," Paul interrupted, "I am the one who should apologize for having so imposed upon your hospitality." And with Mademoiselle Vseslavitch he retired.

So her name was Natalie! Paul liked the name—it seemed to fit her excellently. And he looked lovingly at the charming girl beside him.

"We will take a stroll in the garden, if it pleases you," she suggested.

Paul was delighted. They stepped outside the house into a large enclosure surrounded by a high stone wall. Beyond a small lake which filled the center of the garden, they came to a seat hidden by screening shrubs from the windows that gave upon the spot.

As they sat there under that wonderful Southern sky, with the air laden with the perfume of countless cherry blossoms, Paul felt that he had been translated into fairy-land, and he was almost afraid to speak lest he break the spell and suddenly find himself back in blasé Western Europe again.

He took her hand gently in both of his. It was a beautiful hand, so white and tender and aristocratic. On the third finger was a ring with a blue antique; on her forefinger—worn in the Russian fashion —a diamond. It seemed a talisman to Paul, and as he looked at it he was happy. Feeling the touch of these fingers, his reason stopped dead and a sweet dream came over him—the continuation, as it were, of some interrupted fairy-scene.

"Beautiful Princess!" he whispered softly, as he leaned toward her pale, smiling, gentle face.

Her delicately curved red lips played with mingled melancholy and happiness, and almost childish impulse; and when she spoke, the words were deeply toned, sounding almost like sighs, yet with rapid and impetuous utterance, like a warm

shower of blossoms from her beauteous mouth.

"My lover," she said, and Paul's heart leaped with wild joy at the words, "my lover for this one day—listen while I tell what I can hide from you no longer."

And then with halting words she told him of her peril.

"That house where you stayed last night," she said, "it is the home of my cousin Boris," and a sudden shudder passed over her as she spoke the name. "He has long wished to marry me—and I have steadfastly refused; I cannot tell you how I loathe him. It was to escape his importunities that I went to Switzerland—and alas! now I have come back, at the order of the Tsar, who commands me to yield to him." She paused. Paul drew her close in tender sympathy.

"I thought once," she went on, "when

I left Paris a week ago, that I could force myself to do this hateful thing. A faithful subject must obey the Tsar. But now I know not what the outcome will be. I cannot make up my mind to consent—and Boris grows more impatient every day. Tell me," she turned her wonderful eyes up to Paul—"what manner of people had he with him?"

And Paul described to his lady the villainous Michael with the red hands, and Virot, the oily Frenchman. And as he told of Mademoiselle Ivanovitch, the red-haired woman, the lady's lip curled scornfully.

"A tissue of lies!" she cried. "Those men are the scum of Europe, blackguards of the worst type—the kind Boris has always gathered round him from his boyhood. And the woman—bah!—he has no sister. She is but a mistress he would

have long since cast off were it not that she sometimes is of assistance in his wicked plans.

Then Paul told her of the disturbance of the night before, and of his encounter with the woman that very morning.

Natalie clasped Paul's hand — he thrilled beneath the sudden tightening of her fingers.

"Ah!" she breathed, in sudden agitation, "they must in some way have known your mission all the time. I tremble when I think of the peril you were in. Boris is hot-headed, and it must have angered him almost beyond endurance when he knew that he entertained a rival beneath his own roof. Some men, it is said, have entered that evil house never to be seen more by mortal eyes."

Paul tried to quiet her fears. But, though she soon grew calmer, he saw that

a great dread still lay upon her. And even when they returned to the house, she started apprehensively at every sudden sound.

Paul found brother Peter to be indeed a most gracious host. He had been educated in England, it appeared, and like Paul was an Oxford man. Indeed, the two found many things to talk about, for Peter well remembered the stories he had heard of Paul's record as an oarsman on the 'Varsity eight—traditions of the sort that are handed down from year to year unto succeeding classes.

But as they talked, Paul noticed that Peter's eyes often rested with a troubled look upon his sister. In fact, it seemed to Paul that a black shadow of direful portent hung over them throughout the meal.

CHAPTER XXII

THAT afternoon Paul and his love —for a day, as she had told him— walked down the long avenue of pine-trees. And pacing back and forth beneath the shade he told her many things, some of which she knew already.

She could not repress a smile as he recounted to her the manner in which he had walked up and down the terrace at Lucerne, while—though he knew it not—she saw him from her window.

"And now," he said at last, pausing to look down into her dear face, "forsake, I beg of you, this scene of trouble. Leave this strange land, half West, half East, and come away with me to England. There I will try to make you happy, and

the day will come, I hope, when you will forget that this threatening evil ever came into your life. I do not know even yet the reasons that seem to demand this marriage with your cousin. Come! it shall not be, even though the Tsar demands it. By marrying me, you will become a British subject, and we then can laugh at any human will that would take you from me."

And then he saw a tear upon her lovely cheek. Like a pearl upon the snow it was. Paul took her in his arms, and her beautiful weary head sank upon his shoulder.

"You weep, dear heart!" he said to her, for she was sobbing softly. "Surely this dreadful union must not be. Come—early to-morrow we will start for Kieff, and then—in a few days more—England and freedom!"

She recovered quickly and shook her head.

"No!" she told him. "That can not be. To-morrow morning you must leave this unhappy place. To stay here would be of no avail. It would only make matters worse. Boris is furious now, I know. And it will only make my lot harder if you remain."

Paul could not move her though he pleaded with her for a long time; and his heart was heavy as they at last drew near the house again.

That night, at dinner, Natalie tried bravely to be gay, but even the brilliancy of her conversation and her brother's effort to entertain his guest did not conceal from Paul the strain of the situation. A young relative, Alexis Vseslavitch by name, was present at the board, having ridden in that afternoon from his estate

back in the hills. He was a high-spirited youth and loved dearly to tease his cousin Natalie. But even he saw that for once an unusual restraint seemed upon her.

Afterward, they passed the long evening in the great hall where Paul had waited in the morning. The room was ablaze with candles—and even then the pale lady rang for a servant to bring in more. It was a wild night. A storm had come with the darkness, and outside the wind howled a savage symphony to accompanying crashes of thunder. Mademoiselle sat by her brother, with her hand on the head of an old wolf-hound which frequently looked up at her in dumb adoration as she chattered with the men upon a hundred topics—chiefly travel—for they all loved it.

"Hush, Moka!" she said to the great beast when he sprang up once with a sud-

den growl. "He does not like the thunder," she explained. "Some people who were not welcome came here once, on a wild night like this, when he was but a puppy. They forced their way into this very room—and the old fellow never has forgotten."

In spite of her soothing words, the old dog was restless, and when, as the hour grew late, Paul said good-night, he noticed that the faithful brute was bristling as with anger at some unseen enemy.

Paul reached his chamber by the light of an ancient oil-lamp held aloft by a servant—a hulking chap of somewhat forbidding appearance. Baxter had already prepared Paul's room for the night and was not waiting for his master. Paul said good-night to his attendant, and had turned his back upon the man—when he heard a shout which appeared to come

from the hall below. He stopped short and turned—a movement which he always thought afterward must have saved his life—to receive a glancing, though still a stunning blow, from the butt of a revolver.

Like a log, Paul fell with a crash that shook the room, and knew no more.

Paul was right. The shout did come from below. It was Peter's voice that had sent out that alarming cry.

Paul, it seems, had been gone but a few minutes, when the door of the great hall was flung open and a half-dozen men burst in. It was then that Peter gave a great shout to alarm the household, and in response to which a handful of servants rushed in, Alexander Andrieff, the red-bearded overseer, among them.

All the men were masked, not only

their foreheads, but their faces right down to their chins being hidden in black.

The man who led them stepped forward and ordered the servants back; and they retreated.

A couple of armed and masked men sufficed to keep the few domestics penned in the corner. Two others were stationed on the stairs to check any advances in that direction, while two others kept the passages closed against all further comers.

At the head of the intruders the leader walked swiftly towards Peter, who had advanced to meet him.

"Get back, Peter Vseslavitch," said the leader, still in a pleasant and easy voice; "get back, or I will not answer for your life."

Peter checked himself, but craned his head forward.

"By heaven!" he said in a low voice, "I believe that is you, Boris!"

"Never mind who I may be, but keep your tongue still. Unless you wish it to be forever quieted, refrain from mentioning names in my presence.

"Now turn about, if you please, and get back near the wall."

Mademoiselle's brother was a strong, courageous man. But what may one do against such odds? He looked straight and steadily at the veiled eyes of the intruder, and declined to turn about. So for a brief instant they stood.

The bluster of the storm had effectually drowned any noise of the disturbance except for those who had heard Peter's cry for help. Among them was

Baxter. At a glance, he had taken in the position of affairs.

Nor did he hesitate for a moment. Breaking into a run, he dashed across the hall toward a wall where hung a heavy sword, an heirloom that had not been used for a hundred years. Before he could be stopped he tore it from its fastenings and started toward the nearest of the ruffians, who brought him to a standstill with a revolver.

The leader noted his progress, and turned about and cried, "Keep that man away. If he moves another foot—shoot!"

Baxter threw one contemptuous glance at Boris (for it was he) and came on. The man hesitated to fire.

"Fire! you fool," shouted Boris, but the man still held his hand and hesitated so long that Baxter had gripped the barrel of his revolver in his left hand before

the fellow quite realized what was happening.

If the man had scruples, Boris had none. His revolver spoke quickly, and Baxter, with a little cough, fell forward on his face.

Turning from his butcher's work, Boris whipped round to meet the terror-stricken eyes of Mademoiselle Vseslavitch.

"It is not my fault," he said, "that you have been compelled to look on this."

Then his voice rang out clear and hard.

"Gentlemen," he cried, "I have no desire to create further disturbance. If you will listen to me all will be well."

Turning for a second to Peter, he said, "Get back to the corner of the room."

Peter had no other course but to obey.

Boris next proceeded to deal with the others.

"All of you," he said in a tone of easy command, "all of you get back into the corner, except Mademoiselle."

He watched the retreat through his mask, and when all had crowded together at the end of the room he gave them further orders.

"Let no man move," said he, "if he desires to see another day-break. And if one of you stirs for a quarter of an hour after we leave this room, he will be shot down from yonder window like a dog."

"Now, Mademoiselle," he cried, almost gaily, "take the arm of my fascinating friend here. He will escort you out."

Natalie did not move. Instead she faced him with flaming eyes, the very picture of defiance, and stood there, looking scornfully at Boris and his men.

"Very well," he said. And he motioned to a tall figure a few paces distant.

Then a huge red hand seized Natalie roughly by the arm and dragged her to the door.

Peter and his cousin, and the others in the corner hesitated, looking one to another; then Alexis, more bold than the rest, jumped forward, crying, "Never, you dirty scoundrel!" And dashed across the floor.

Boris let him come on, and it said something for the coolness of the man that he did not even fire, but waited till the lad was upon him. Then he swung round, and catching him back of the ear with the butt of his pistol, sent him sprawling senseless to the floor.

After that there was no demonstration of any kind. It was obvious that Boris and his scoundrels had provided against every contingency and had counted on complete success.

They backed toward the door, through which Michael, the pseudo-cousin, had dragged his captive, and Boris was the last to leave the hall. As he stood there, he made a little bow of mockery.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have to thank you for your hospitality and for your generosity. With your kind permission I will now withdraw."

CHAPTER XXIII

OUT into the storm Michael thrust the lady with his murderous hands; and at once, with an ease his great strength gave him, he tossed her on his horse, which was tied with others in the court-yard. Then he swung himself into the saddle, and an instant later, when the rest of the pack came tumbling out into the night, they were off.

One wanton villain—it was the French gutter-snipe, Virot—paused a moment to ride up to a window of the hall and discharge his revolver through the glass. Fortunately his aim was as evil as his intent. Beyond shattering a priceless vase, the bullet did no damage.

The night was black as pitch, and Michael cursed his horse roundly as the willing animal, jumping under the spur, grazed the great gate as he sprang through it. Soon they were all out on the main road, where the thoroughbred that carried a double burden settled down into a long swinging stride that fairly devoured the distance, league after league.

Looking out on the country in the flashes of lightning, Natalie's heart gave a little jump, for she recognized the high hedges between which they were running as those that lined the great highway to the west, which led to the château her cousin maintained, a day's journey distant from his shooting lodge near her own family estate. They were taking her there, then! And her heart sank at the thought.

Nor was she wrong. For at last, after a

cruel ride, in which they covered the journey in half the usual time, the steaming, panting horses were urged up a smooth road, which climbed in curves up the face of a steep hill. Then they came to a small plateau and stopped soon before a gate on which someone knocked loudly.

Several fierce dogs began baying. Light began to show in the east now, and Natalie saw a man push open the massive gate. Then, in another minute, she was in the château.

In a waiting-room, which projected over a vast cliff, Boris faced his captive. As he stood there a woman entered—the red-haired creature whom Boris had introduced to Paul as his sister.

He beckoned her to draw near.

"This," he said to Natalie, "is Madame Estelle. You see, I have provided a

chaperone," he remarked with something like a sneer.

Natalie looked coldly at the two, but said nothing.

Madame Estelle flushed slightly under Natalie's scornful scrutiny as she led the way into an immense dining-room.

To reach this room they had traversed a long passage, and Natalie appreciated the fact that the château was very curiously built. It consisted, indeed, of two portions, which were linked together by a long stone-flagged corridor.

Boris helped himself liberally to neat brandy, while Madame Estelle sent for a servant and told him to order tea.

Natalie had been filled with an intense foreboding as she entered the house, a foreboding which increased as she slowly recognized that she and Madame Estelle

were apparently the only women in the place.

For the tea was brought in by a man, not a farmhand or an honest countryman, but a villainous-looking individual with a pock-marked face and little gold earrings in the lobes of his frost-bitten ears. He walked with his feet wide apart, and with a slightly rolling gait. He had an immense bull neck, and the hands with which he grasped the tray were large, grimy and hairy. Natalie set him down as a sailor; nor was she wrong.

When tea was over, Boris lit a cigarette, and drawing Madame Estelle on one side conversed with her for some time in whispers.

At the end of the conference between the two the woman left the room without so much as a word to Natalie or even a glance in her direction.

Boris turned round with a baleful light in his eyes.

"Now, my lady," he said, "we can have this matter out."

Natalie's afflictions had only increased her old habit of command and her natural dignity. Though in reality she was the prisoner, she might have been the captor.

"Before you speak, Boris," she said, "I also have something to say. How long do you intend to keep me here? I ask this, not for my own sake, but for my brother's."

"That," said Boris, with a malicious grin, "depends entirely on yourself."

"By this time, of course," Natalie continued, "a great hue-and-cry will have been raised after me. Again I ask this question for my brother's sake. He should be informed of my whereabouts at once;

for you must remember that he will take this very much to heart."

"He will not be informed of your whereabouts at present," said Boris, shortly. "Because," he continued, with a villainous leer, "I am only cruel to be kind. I want to have all the details of our marriage settled as soon as possible. A night of waiting will soften your dear brother's heart, and he will probably listen to reason in the morning."

Natalie shuddered and drew a little further away from Boris. "You coward," she said, and looked at him with infinite contempt.

Again a dangerous light leapt into his eyes.

"Have a care," he cried, "what names you call me here. I do not wish to be compelled to make you feel your position. But if necessary I shall——"

Natalie did not take her scornful eyes from his face, and Boris at last looked shiftily away.

As he apparently did not intend to speak again, she put to him another question:

"Who is the woman," she asked, "you have here with you?"

"That is no business of yours," snarled Boris, "though you can, if you wish to speak to or allude to her, call her Madame Estelle, as I introduced her to you."

"I merely asked," said Natalie, "because I was curious to know how she came to be associated with a rascal like you."

"Ah! my dear cousin, that is something you will understand better a little later." He said this with an insinuating air which filled Natalie with loathing.

"Boris," she said coldly, "I decline altogether to allow you to insult me."

She turned her back on him, and Boris swore at her without disguise. But she paid no heed.

Presently he walked round the room so that he could come face to face with her.

"It is early," he said, "but early hours will do you good. If you will be so kind as to accompany me I will show you to your room."

He led the way up three flights of stairs till they came to a small landing. Out of this there opened only one door, and through this Boris passed.

Natalie now found herself in a large, square room, simply and yet fairly well furnished, partly as a bedroom and partly as a sitting-room.

"It is here," said Boris, "that I am un-

fortunately compelled to ask you to make your decision.

"You are at perfect liberty to scream to your heart's content. There is no one here who will mind in the least. You are also at perfect liberty to make what efforts at escape you choose. I fear that you will only find them futile."

He went out quickly and closed the door after him. Natalie, listening in the badly-lighted room, could hear a key grate in the lock and bolts shot in both at the top and the bottom of the door.

Quickly and methodically she made an examination of her prison. She looked into the cupboards and into the drawers and the massive bureau. But there was nothing about the room of the remotest interest to her which offered the faintest suggestion, sinister or otherwise.

It was, indeed, only when she looked

out of the windows, of which there were three, that she discovered to the full how utterly helpless was her position.

The window on the south side was apparently over the window of the dining-room, and, as she peeped over the sill, looked sheer down the face of the precipice beneath her.

The west window, she found, looked down into a stone courtyard, while the window on the east overhung the moat. Apparently she was imprisoned in a tower.

When Boris had reached the ground floor he sought out Madame Estelle, and drew a chair to the table at which Madame sat at breakfast.

"Estelle," he said, "the crisis in our fortunes has arrived to-day. I want all the help you can give me, and you will want all your nerve."

Madame Estelle eyed him calmly.

"Indeed," she said. "But even though the crisis in our fortunes arrived within the next ten minutes there are certain questions which I must ask you first."

Boris fidgeted impatiently. He realized that he could no longer baulk the question of Natalie, and the sooner he got himself out of the difficulty the better for his day's work. He had all along concealed from Estelle the fact that he meant to marry his cousin.

"Boris," said Madame, stretching out her right hand and brushing Boris's lightly with her fingers, are you playing me false?"

"Playing you false?' he cried, with a fine show of indignation. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that either you have told me too much or too little. If I am to believe

you, this girl we hold is worth at least half a million roubles to us. You say you are certain of the money, and that the moment it is yours we are to be married and leave this miserable mode of life. If this is so I am content. But now I suspect something else. Is it not true that as part of the bargain you are to be permitted to marry her?"

Boris jumped out of his chair.

"It's a lie!" he shouted, "and I'll take my oath that that rattle-brained fool Verdayne is responsible for your stupid fancies."

"But are they fancies?" urged Madame.

"Fancies! Of course they are fancies. What good do you think it would do me to be tied to a girl like that? Surely half a million should content any man. I wish to be free to pursue my life with

you. The sooner indeed I am free from all this business the better."

Madame Estelle looked greatly troubled.

"Are you sure, Boris," she asked again, "that this is absolutely true? Oh! be sure that I dislike to distress you in this way, but I cannot help it."

"My dear Estelle," Boris cried, with a greater show of tenderness than he had yet exhibited, "surely I have been true enough and faithful enough all these years for you to believe me now. Indeed, you must believe in me, because if you don't believe in me and give me your support the cup of happiness which is so near our lips may be dashed away from them.

"Wait!" he went on, "and see whether I am speaking the truth or not."

Nevertheless, Madame was restless and ill at ease.

"If I had seen that girl before to-day," she said, "I should never have entered into this business with you."

"Then you would have been a fool," said Boris, rudely.

"Possibly, but still, even at the risk of your displeasure, there are a few things which I do not care to do."

Boris glanced at her sharply.

"Of course," she continued, "it is too late now. I have made up my mind, and we will go through with it, but frankly, I don't like this business."

"Never mind," said Boris; "it will not last forever. To-morrow ought to settle it."

As Madame at this point started to leave the room, Boris enjoined her to silence; and though Madame promised

that she would not discuss his affairs with Natalie, she was, if the truth were told, not quite decided whether she would keep her word.

Then Boris sent for Michael.

"Mark you, Michael," he said, "I will have no hanky-panky games in this house. And, mark you, too, I have no desire to have Madame Estelle and Mademoiselle Vseslavitch becoming too friendly. You never can rely on women. They are funny creatures, and Madame is far too sympathetic with the girl already. So I shall look to you to stop anything of that sort.

"For the rest, you will know what to do if certain contingencies should arise. I have not brought the dogs here for nothing." He broke off and shuddered a little himself as at some short distance from the house he could hear the baying of the great hounds.

"They are loose, I suppose?" he asked.

Michael nodded.

"Then Heaven help the stranger," he rejoined with a cruel laugh, and pulling a rug over himself he lay down to sleep on the sofa.

CHAPTER XXIV

BORIS had left no instructions in regard to Mademoiselle's food, and as she did not consider it advisable to let the unfortunate girl starve, Madame set a tray, with the intention of carrying it up to Natalie's room.

Before she could do this, however, it was necessary to send for Michael in order to obtain the key.

When she asked for it, he shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"I have very strict orders," he said.

"What do you mean?" Madame demanded sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Simply that the master said that you and the young lady were not to get talking too much. He said nothing about

food, or of waiting on her highness, and it didn't occur to me until this morning that it was a bit awkward for a chap like myself to wait on her.

"However," he added, with a smirk, "I don't so much mind."

But Michael's clumsy utterances had aroused all Madame's sleeping suspicions. There was no reason why she should keep silence.

She laughed in Michael's face.

"It was hardly necessary for your master to give you any orders, seeing that he gave certain instructions to me. He said that since there was no other woman in the house it would be my place to take Mademoiselle anything that she actually needed. I am going to take up her breakfast now. Give me the key."

Michael hesitated a moment, but final-

ly handed over the key. Madame put it on the breakfast tray and went upstairs.

Natalie, as she heard the bolts drawn back and the key turned in the lock, suffered fresh apprehension. For she had caught the rustle of Madame's skirts outside, and she would rather have faced Boris than the woman.

With very little apology Madame Estelle entered, and, setting the breakfast down, immediately withdrew.

In half an hour's time she went up for the tray, and then she faced Natalie boldly and looked her in the eyes.

"Mademoiselle," she said, "I am really ashamed to meet you here in such a way. I will not ask you to forgive me, for you will not understand. I can only tell you that I am a very loving and also a very jealous woman."

Madame Estelle paused, and was con-

scious that Natalie looked at her in great surprise.

"I want," she continued, "to ask you a question which means much to me. Is it, or is not, one of Boris Ivanovitch's conditions that you shall marry him?"

"Yes," answered Natalie, very quietly, "it is."

Madam's rather flushed face grew white, and her eyes blazed with passion. She clenched her fists and beat the air with them.

"Oh, the liar!" she cried, "the liar! Oh! it is hard to be treated like this when I have done so much for him."

Natalie drew back, startled and amazed.

"I assure you that you need have no fear so far as I am concerned. Both my brother and myself have refused to com-

ply with that condition, and we shall refuse to the end."

Madame, however, paid but little heed to Natalie; she was beside herself with rage.

"Ah, ah!" she cried, "wait till he returns! I'll kill him! I'll kill him!"

So distorted with fury was the woman's face that Natalie became alarmed for her sanity. She drew near to her and endeavoured to catch her hands in her own, imploring her to be calm.

By-and-by Madame Estelle listened to her, and in a sudden revulsion of feeling fell on her knees, sobbing bitterly.

Natalie bent over her, doing her best to console her, and presently, as the woman grew calmer, she endeavoured to turn the situation to her own advantage.

"The best way to defeat his scheme," she urged, "is to release me."

But at that Madame Estelle leaped to her feet.

"Ah! not that," she cried, "not that! If I distrust him, I distrust you still more. Your pretty face may look sad and sorrowful, and you may declare to me that you will never consent, but I will wait and see. I'll wait until Boris returns and confront you with him. Then perhaps I shall learn the real truth."

Natalie made a little despairing gesture with her hands; argument, she saw, would be useless.

Gathering herself together, Madame blundered, half blind with tears, out of the room, and Natalie with a sinking heart heard the bolts drawn again.

All through the day Estelle sat brooding, sending Natalie's lunch and tea up to her by Michael.

All the evening she still sat and brood-

ed, until she had worked herself up into a hysteria of rage.

It was long after dark when a knock sounded on her door. It was Boris.

"Ah!" she cried, as he entered, "what do you think I have gone through? What do you think I have suffered? What do you think I have found out?"

Boris looked at her in alarm.

"Is it Mademoiselle?" he asked. "Is she safe?"

"Safe! Oh, yes, she is safe," she cried, with a peal of uncanny laughter. "Safe for your kisses and for your caresses. Oh, you liar! you liar! I have been true to you in all respects, and you have been false to me in everything that mattered. So you will marry the pretty Natalie, will you? Oh, but you won't! Never! Never!"

She rushed at Boris, as though to strike

him, but Boris, jaded though he was, was quick and strong.

He caught her brutally, as he might a dog, by the neck, and threw her into the dining-room, the door of which stood open, and, utterly careless as to what harm he might do to her, sent the unhappy woman sprawling onto the floor. In a second he had banged the door to and turned the key in the lock.

He heard Estelle pick herself up and hurl herself in blind and impotent fury against the door.

He listened as shriek after shriek of frenzy reached his ears.

Up in the tower Natalie heard these shrieks, too, and shuddered. A horrible fear took possession of her heart that there was murder being done below.

She sat on the edge of her bed with her

hands pressed to her heart, listening in fascinated horror.

The shrieks died away, and there was complete silence in the house for full half an hour.

Then she heard a sudden shout, a crashing of glass and a scrambling, tearing noise, the hideous bay of the boarhounds in the courtyard, a scream, and a thud.

Stabbing the other noise with sharp precision came the sound of shots.

CHAPTER XXV

MEANWHILE, at the estate of Peter Vseslavitch, the day dawned clear and fine—but upon what a scene of uproar!

All night the household had been corked up as if tight in a bottle—as far as following the marauders was concerned; for when, a few minutes after that last intimidating shot of Virot's, they had burst out of the house and run quickly to the stables, it was only to discover that all the horses were gone.

"By the ever-to-be-praised apostles!" swore Andrieff, his red beard wagging in impotent rage, "the devils have turned the horses loose on the *steppe*. Every box is empty!"

It was true—and almost frantic with distress Peter and the overseer had been forced to turn back into the house to wait till daybreak.

Well! there was work there for them while they waited. Paul and the lad Alexis were soon brought back to consciousness with nothing more serious than badly swollen and throbbing heads. But poor Baxter still lay in a heap on the floor. He seemed not to have stirred. And Peter thought, as he knelt over him, that he would never move again.

They lifted his sagging body to a couch and then Andrieff, who was something of an amateur surgeon, examined him carefully.

The bullet had ploughed a furrow just above his temple; but after some probing Andrieff decided it had passed on without penetrating the skull. His heart was still

beating faintly and they forced spirits between his lips until after a time he revived. Paul himself helped put the wounded man in bed and would not leave him until he saw that Baxter had dropped off into a natural sleep.

Then with the others he paced the floor impatiently until it began to grow light. There were four of them—and with the help of as many more trusty servants they felt they could give Boris and his crew a pretty fight—if they could only find him!

Not till they came to decide on what men they would take with them did Paul recall how he had been disposed of earlier in the night.

"That big *moujik* who showed me to my room last evening!" he cried suddenly, turning to Peter. "Where is the dog? It was he who struck me down!"

"By the Lord!" exclaimed Andrieff,

"that explains why the horses are gone! The cur is a traitor! I'll cut his heart out this day!"

"He took old Moka out of the room, too, do you remember?" Peter asked. "He must have been in Boris's pay all the while—the man has been with us but a short time. Oh! if I could but get my hands upon his villainous throat!" But of what avail were imprecations? The four men finally ceased to talk, but the fierce determination which grimly lighted each face, boded ill for Boris' cut-throat gang, when they should be come up with, on the morrow.

At last day dawned, and as soon as they could catch horses enough—the brutes had wandered back toward the stables as it became lighter—they were off.

The heavy rain, which had kept up nearly all the night, had completely oblit-

erated the fugitives' tracks. Without a trail their first step seemed to be to visit the shooting-lodge whence Boris had made his sally.

Two hours' hard riding brought them to the place. It looked deserted, but Paul rode his horse close to the door and knocked viciously upon it. There was no response.

"It seems," said Peter, with a politeness that his looks belied, "that our friends are not at home."

Verdayne's answer sounded very much like an oath. He gave the door one final kick, and finding his rough summons ineffectual, turned to his companions.

"Look you!' he said. "I am not at all sure that this house is as empty as it seems. I'm going to ride alongside the garden wall so that I can climb over the top. I want to go investigating."

In a twinkling he had put his plan into execution and dropped over the wall into the garden. He walked round the house and found it shuttered, dark and silent. He whistled a long whistle to himself.

"I wonder," he thought, "if all the birds have flown. I wonder if they really have left the house entirely empty." Just then Andrieff joined him, and putting their shoulders against the rear door that opened into the garden, they easily forced an entrance. With drawn revolvers they leaped inside, and began to prowl about the place. Finally in a wardrobe on an upper floor they discovered a servant hiding. As they dragged him out at first he showed fight, but one blow from Andrieff's sledge-like fist beat him into submission, and in another moment they had him pinned against the wall.

"Tell me where your master is," said Andrieff in a fierce voice.

The man remained silent.

"Tell me," he said again, "and tell me quickly. Tell me at once or you will regret it."

The man gave a sudden wrench and twisted one of his arms free. He reached out and grasped a heavy silver candlestick.

But Andrieff was too quick for him. He dealt him a blow on the muscles of his shoulder which half paralyzed the creature's arm. The candlestick dropped with a clatter from his hand.

Then Andrieff gave his pent-up passion full play, and it was a miracle that he did not kill his man.

He wrenched an antimacassar from a chair and used it as a gag. With one powerful hand he dragged the captive by

the neck to the window; with the other he threw up the casement and whistled sharply for Peter, who soon came running up the stairs and through the open door.

"We'll bind this cur," said the overseer through his teeth, and he thrust the man back into a deep, cane-hooded chair. Then he and Peter securely lashed the man's feet together, tying his hands behind his back.

This work done, they paused and listened; but, in spite of the scuffle there had been, there was no sound of approaching footsteps, nor, indeed, any sign that they had been overheard.

"Now, then," said he of the red beard, "heat that poker in the fire."

Peter quickly thrust the poker between the bars of the grate, in which the coals were red.

"Stoi!" cried the man—"Stop!" They have gone to the old *Château Ivanovitch."*

"If you're lying," said Andrieff, "we'll come back and cut you into ribbons for the dogs."

"By the beard of my father," the man gasped, "I am telling you the truth. God strike me if I am not!" and he looked at the reddening poker with frightened eyes.

"I believe the hound speaks truly," said Peter. "Come! we have no time to waste here." Leaving the whimpering peasant tied, they hurried down to the court-yard, and soon were in the saddle again.

The splendid animals they rode responded nobly. They were of a famous Arabian strain, which his grandfather had introduced into his stable many years before, and Peter, who led the little band,

did not spare them. On and on they raced, but it was late afternoon when they neared the end of the trail, for several hours had been consumed in the detour to the hunting-lodge.

About a half mile from the foot of the eminence on which the château stood, they came to a halt, and after a short consultation decided it would be best to wait till after dark before trying to effect an entrance. Accordingly, they dismounted, and leading their horses a little distance into a sheltering wood, they waited impatiently until night fell. Even then they agreed, though reluctantly, that it would be the wiser plan to wait another two hours at least, when there would probably be fewer people stirring about the château.

At last, and it seemed an eternity to Paul, as he waited in the gloomy wood

with his heart heavy with anxiety for his dear love—at last he heard the signal given which told him the time had come. And soon they were in the road again.

It was intensely dark beneath the trees, and Paul could feel light boughs and sometimes heavy branches scrape along his shoulders.

Suddenly they stopped, and Paul saw that they were in a little clearing. Then the flame of a match outlined the shape of a gate.

"Here we are," cried Peter, in a low voice.

They dismounted and, gathering around Peter, discussed the situation quickly. It was agreed at length that Verdayne, with Andrieff and Alexis, should pass the gate and proceed to the château to reconnoitre, while Peter re-

mained with the others at the gate until they should return.

Paul started forward therefore with the overseer and Peter's cousin. He pulled back the iron catch and to his surprise found that the gate was unlocked.

"Come!" he said, as he pulled it open, and the three went in together.

CHAPTER XXVI

BUT as Paul strode in his eager foot found no foothold, and he pitched forward, to find himself plunged up to the neck in icy water.

So great was the shock that a little involuntary exclamation escaped him as he spluttered and blew the water from his mouth. A couple of strokes brought him back to the gate again, and as he clutched it he looked up at the silent house.

Even as he did so he caught a little spit of flame from one of the windows and a bullet splashed into the water beside his head. There was another spit of flame, and he felt his knuckles tingle as though they had been rapped with a red-hot iron.

Then Andrieff gripped him by the col-

lar, and with his aid he scrambled back onto the path.

Alexis, who had been quick to see the necessity of instant action, was by this time firing back at the place from which the little spits of flame had come far above them. In the darkness he answered shot for shot.

After the sound of the shots came a complete silence, and Paul, as he stood stock-still beside the gate, which was now swinging idly over the moat, could hear the patter of the water on the path as it dripped from his clothes.

Andrieff, as soon as he had seen that Paul was safe, had run along the hedge, and now he gave a shout.

"This is the gate we want," he cried.

But a third spit of flame came from the darkness overhead, and Paul heard the overseer swearing softly under his breath.

Whoever their unknown assailant might be, he was no mean marksman.

Paul and Alexis ran to Andrieff's aid.

"What's up?" asked Paul.

"Nothing," answered Andrieff, and he got the gate opened. The three men dashed up the path and reached a small door; but it was made of stout oak, and securely fastened within.

They thrust their shoulders against it without avail, and then stood looking at one another, panting, and for the moment baffled.

It was then that Paul's quick ear caught a woman's voice. He whipped round and looked across the sheet of water. His eyes were now well accustomed to the gloom, and he saw the form of a woman leaning far out of a window and gesticulating wildly.

He held up his hand to the others for

silence, and then once more came a voice which he instantly recognized. It was the voice of the red-haired woman.

"Be quick! Be quick!" she cried. "If you don't wish to be too late, you must swim the moat—the door is barred."

Paul cast a quick glance behind him, and his eyes fell on the gate.

"Use that as a battering ram," he ordered, and then his jaws closed over the butt of his revolver.

Without hesitation he waded in, and a few strong strokes brought him beneath the window out of which Madame Estelle leant and waved.

He knew instinctively by her accents that she was terrified beyond measure and that he need not expect treachery from her.

With one hand he clutched the sill, with the other he reached up and shifting

the safety-catch on with his thumb, let his revolver fall into the room.

Soaked as he was with water, it was not an easy task to hoist himself up and clamber through the window, and when at last he stood within the room he leant against the wall partially exhausted and breathing hard.

Madame Estelle stood before him wringing her hands.

"Be quick!" she said again. "Be quick! be quick! or you will be too late. That fiend Boris is at his work."

By the light of the candles which flickered on the mantelpiece Paul made his way to the door.

Seizing the handle, he turned it, but the lock held fast. He examined it swiftly, and to his joy saw that it opened outwards. He drew back a yard, and then sent the whole of his weight crashing

against the panels. And with good fortune the door of the room, although stoutly built, was partially rotten. It burst wide open and sent him sprawling onto his face in the passage.

As he lay there half-stunned his pulses throbbed again as the noise which came from the main entrance told him that Alexis and Andrieff were making good use of the gate.

He dragged himself up to his knees, still clutching his revolver, and at the same moment the outer door gave up its resistance, and Alexis and Andrieff came headlong into the hall-way.

He heard them give a warning shout as he struggled to his feet, steadying himself by the pillars of the banisters.

Looking up the stairs, he saw the brutal face of the villain Michael on the

landing, his strong, yellow teeth bared in a vicious snarl.

Paul heard the sound of a shot, and at the same time felt the hands of Madame Estelle give him a push.

Her intention was unselfish, almost heroic; she saved Paul's life, but lost her own.

With a little gasping sigh she pitched forward and lay still, huddled on the stairs. Then Paul heard a second shot rap out from behind his back, and saw Michael stagger on the landing. The man reeled for a couple of paces and then fell heavily.

Verdayne had by this time fully got back his senses and his breath; and now he heard coming from somewhere high above him scream after scream of dreadful terror.

He plunged up the staircase, and step-

ping across the body of Michael as it lay on the landing, raced up the second flight of stairs. For a moment he paused in the hall, in order to make doubly sure whence the terrified scream came.

Then he heard it again, louder and shriller than before. There was a dreadful note of fear in it. It was the scream of a woman.

As he stood there trying to locate the direction of the cry, a servant bearing a lantern in his hand ran toward him. The man was unarmed, apparently.

"What is that?" Paul demanded of him. But the man merely shrugged his shoulders.

Then there came the scream again, louder and more terror-stricken than before. Paul did not hesitate.

Before the servant had time to utter any protest he had snatched the lantern

from his hand and was racing up the third flight to the topmost landing.

Again came the scream, and Paul suddenly found his way barred by a door across the corridor.

Now there was no longer any doubt as to where the cries came from. Paul dashed at the door, only to find it locked. In a second he had his shoulder against the panel, and the door went in with a crash, disclosing a small anteroom, formed by the end of the hall-way. And then Paul saw before him another door, before which stood the fat Frenchman, Virot, with a shining knife in his hand. Paul covered him with his revolver.

"Drop that knife," he ordered.

"Not me!" said the portly rogue.

"Drop it!" said Paul again, with an unmistakable threat in his voice.

And this time the man dropped it.

"Now," Paul cried, "away with you, before I send you to hell before your time."

Virot smiled in appreciation of the compliment, and at once started down the hall as fast as his short legs could carry him. The rascal was always careful of his precious skin.

Paul turned the handle of the door, only to find, as he had expected, that the key on the inner side had been turned and he groaned within himself. He was living in some awful nightmare at which a door faced him at every turn.

He emptied his revolver in the lock and hurled himself in frenzy against this further obstruction. It gave way, and he tottered into the room, the lights of which for a moment dazzled him.

His half-blinded eyes were greeted by the sight which he had dreaded ever since

he had come to the farm on the hill.

Natalie was fighting desperately, and for life, with Boris.

With a great cry Paul leapt forward, but he was too late to exercise that vengeance which had now full possession of his soul.

Boris flung Natalie to one side, and for a second turned his pallid face, in which his eyes were burning like a madman's, full on Paul as he dashed on him.

Then without a sound he leapt aside, and vaulting on to the sill of the open window, jumped out.

Instinctively Paul knew what was coming, and catching Natalie to him, held her head against his breast, stopping her ears with his hands. Then as he stood there with his eyes bent on her hair, he heard the sickening sound of Boris's body thud on to the stones below.

Releasing Natalie's ears, he put his hand under her chin and lifted up her face. He marvelled that she had not fainted, but the dreadful horror in her eyes struck into his heart like a blow.

He had to hold her to prevent her falling to the floor, and so he stood for some few seconds with her form limp and shivering in his arms.

Bracing himself for one last effort, Paul lifted her up and bore her out of the room. Half-dazed, he stumbled down the stairs with her until he reached the hall.

In the doorway he saw Peter, who came running forward with outstretched arms.

"Just a minute," said Paul quickly, and he walked into the room, the door of which he had shattered.

In the meantime Andrieff and the lad had picked up Madame Estelle and car-

ried her into the same room, and now she lay on the couch, her face growing grey with the shadows of death, and her breath coming fast and feebly. Her eyes stared up at the ceiling with an intense and horrible fixity.

Paul pushed an armchair round with his foot and set his lady down on it so that her back was turned to the dying woman.

Peter fell on his knees beside the chair, and seizing his sister's hands, held them against his breast.

Paul crossed over to Madame Estelle and stood over her. He put his hand against her heart and listened to her breathing.

"I am afraid," he said in a low voice to Andrieff, "that we can do nothing for her. It is a bad business. Heaven forgive her for anything she has done amiss! She did her best to make amends."

Then he drew Alexis out of the room and told him to fetch a lamp.

When he had fetched the lamp Paul took it and began rapidly to examine round the ground floor of the rambling building. He was seeking for the courtyard into which Boris had fallen.

At last they found it, and found, too, all that remained of Boris Ivanovitch. He was battered and crushed and bruised almost beyond recognition.

Paul set his face and straightened the twisted and distorted body out.

Then he straightened himself, and picking up the lamp led the way back into the house.

By this time Natalie, though very pale and still shaken, was quite composed. Indeed, she was now more self-possessed than her brother. She was doing her utmost to quiet his still painful agitation.

Paul looked into her face, and seeing how strong and resolute it was, felt no hesitation in speaking before her.

"Sir," he said very quietly to Peter, "Boris is dead."

Peter glanced at him quickly and then turned to his sister.

"Thank heaven!" he cried.

"Hush," said Natalie, gently, and taking her brother by the arm she pointed to Madame Estelle.

Andrieff had done what he could, and the unhappy woman had, to some extent, come back to consciousness.

She was indeed sufficiently alive to catch Paul's words. She brought her fast fading eyes down from the ceiling and searched his face.

"Boris!" she muttered to herself: "Boris!"

Paul drew near and knelt down by the

couch. He took one of her hands, which was even then growing cold.

"Boris?" she asked again in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

Paul put his mouth down to her ear and said slowly, "He is dead."

The shock of the news acted on the woman in a most extraordinary way. With a convulsive movement she suddenly gathered herself together and sat bolt upright on the couch. She would have fallen back again had not Paul caught her in his arms.

The woman opened her mouth and made two or three efforts before she spoke again, and then she only breathed the word "Boris!"

Paul's gaze wandered over the sideboard.

"See if you can find any brandy," he

said to Andrieff, who instantly produced a decanter.

Paul took the glass from his hand and pressed it to Madame Estelle's lips. She revived a little, and suddenly spoke clearly and in almost her normal voice.

"Sir Paul," she said, "forgive!" Then her eyes became fixed and staring, and it was Paul who drew the dead woman's eyelids down.

"Sir Paul," said Peter, earnestly, "it is simply impossible that I shall ever be able to repay you the great service you have rendered me. But, believe me, if there is anything in the world it is within my power to give you, you have but to ask to receive it."

Paul looked across at Natalie, but said nothing. The time had not yet come when he could ask Peter for that which would a thousand times repay him.

CHAPTER XXVII

PAUL never quite knew how he retraced the distance to the Vseslavitch mansion. The combined effects of the blow he had received at the hands of the treacherous servant, the fall at the gate, and the long hours of mental anguish he had undergone, were quite enough to befog his brain. He rode back reeling in his saddle, and once in his bed he stayed there for two days before he was himself again.

When he joined the others at last he found that the household had recovered its equanimity. They had feared at first some serious consequences as a result of the fight at the château, with three people lying dead there. But the

Frenchman had apparently decided that his own precious skin would be safer if the matter were hushed up with as little ado as possible. He did not know, it appeared, that Baxter had not been killed by the shot from Boris's revolver, and he had no wish to admit any connection with that affair. Accordingly, as Peter learned later, Virot had reported to the authorities that Boris had shot Madame Estelle and Michael during a fit of jealousy, and then, seized with remorse, had taken his own life.

The whole bearing of Mademoiselle Vseslavitch and her brother had changed —Paul noticed that immediately. Now that with Boris's death the cause of their former disquiet had been removed forever they were two entirely different persons. It made Paul's heart glad to hear the buoyant note in Natalie's voice as she

talked with them gaily. And his own spirits rose as well, for now, he thought, the obstacle to his suit had been brushed aside.

That day passed quickly, for there was much to talk about. Alexis Vseslavitch was still there, for he had refused to leave while Paul seemed in any danger. And the four discussed at length the events of those two memorable nights.

That night Paul went once more with Natalie to the garden. As the soft night received them in its warm embrace, it seemed to Paul that in that spot lay all the glory of the earth, and a whole Heaven besides. For very joy, he could have died while looking into her eyes. How madly he loved her! How beautiful she was! As he gazed at her pale face, shining forth from her dark tresses, it seemed to Paul like the very moon

above, gleaming from the dusky clouds. He took her cool hand and pressed it to his eyes, till the ringing in his heart was still. All nature seemed enchanted. For a time, Paul could not speak. He only knew that God had created men to admire the glories of the world, and that here was a wonderful night—and a no less wonderful woman.

Once more they sat down upon the bench where they had talked two short days before—but what a difference! Then his heart was sorely troubled—now all was peace.

Like a sea of life, Spring covered the world. The snowy blossom-foam fluttered on the trees; all was bathed in a wondrous hazy glow. Everywhere miracles were working. And then Paul awoke from his dream and spoke.

"Natalie!" he said, "I cannot part

from you. I have told you that I love you." And then with moist eyes and flaming lips he cried: "Be mine—and love me!"

Oh! then fell the evening gold upon Paul's soul! Like a fairy bell came the sound of her voice upon his ears:

"My Knight of Love," she said, "what wouldst thou have more?"

And at those words, Paul folded her within his arms.

Later as they sat there in the moonlight, she told Paul more of the unworthy marriage which had been so nearly forced upon her; how Boris being heir-apparent of a Balkan state—Sovna—had been able to enlist the help of the Tsar in coercing her. Many of the Sovnian subjects were Slavs who had emigrated from her own province and the Tsar felt that such

a union would do much toward cementing the friendship between the two countries. As for Boris, political reasons had little to do with the suit. Her fortune was all he cared for. And at the thought of his perfidy, so nearly triumphant, she trembled anew with horror.

And then as Paul comforted her, he told her with amusement how he had interpreted the note that she had written him in Paris—that he had thought her a secret agent of the Dalmatian government.

The lady laughed at that.

"And when, pray, were you disillusioned?" she asked him. "Two days ago you called me 'Princess'—in the garden here. How did you know that?"

Paul looked at her in amazement.

"Princess!" he repeated. And then he remembered that he had used the word—

as an endearing name, that seemed so well to fit his love.

"What do you mean, my Natalie?" he cried. "Are you really of royal blood?"

"Yes, Paul," she answered. "You did not know it then? I wanted to appear to you as a commoner—just a normal, every day woman. And see! you loved me when you thought I was a mere servant! That is the wonderful part of it all to me."

Yet Paul's heart sank as the possible meaning of the news started forth to his consciousness. Was not her rank an impassable barrier between them? he asked himself. Must he again return to England to drag out the rest of life alone, with his love the width of a continent away?

He asked these things with a rush of words that fell from his trembling lips.

"Ah, Paul!" the lady said, caressingly, "fear not. I am tired of being only a princess! The world sees but the glittering show of royalty, and does not know it for the sham it really is. The trappings, the gorgeous robes that kings and queens assume when they are crowned hide bleeding hearts and sorrowful breasts. I have seen too much of the cares of state —the awful tragedy—the bitter grief. Long since I decided that I would have no more of it. Better a dinner of herbs, where love is, you know. And so Peter and I came here to this quiet spot—the old home of my mother—and took her name. And here we thought to live like simple gentle-folk, till Boris broke rudely into our Arcadia.

"And now, Paul," she continued, looking up at him with the love-light shining in her eyes, "the time has come when you

may know all. Forgive me, dear, for the long waiting. But I had to be sure as you will see."

She drew from her bosom a folded paper and placed it in his hand.

Paul opened it, and saw it was a letter. He held it closer, and then, in the white moonlight pouring from that Southern sky—great God!—he saw the writing of his Lady of Long Ago!

And this is what Paul read:

"MY SWEET SISTER:

"I know that I must leave this beautiful earth. Already I feel beside me, waking as well as sleeping, a mysterious presence, who lays his cold hand upon my naked breast, and claims me for his own. It is Death, my Natalie, that stalks beside me, and that day is not far distant when his icy fingers will close relentlessly upon my quivering heart—and it will beat no more.

"Ah! my little one, God keep thee safe from such griefs as I have borne. But God grant thee the happiness I have also known.

"And now, child, I must talk to thee as to the woman thou wilt be when thy dear eyes read these words—a score of years from now! Thou wilt be a beautiful woman then—and I—a little dust will still remain, perhaps.

"But, listen. My son, the baby Prince—thou wilt watch over him with tender care, I know. And then—for thee the time will pass quickly, while I lie slowly crumbling—before thou knowest it, almost, he will be a man—and crowned.

"Then, Natalie, thou wilt read this message from the living dead, for from that time on Paul Verdayne will need thee. He is my true lover, sweetheart, and when his son is set apart from his life forever by the necessities of state—then will he know his hour of greatest need. Search

him out, Natalie, my sister—Paul Verdayne, the Englishman.

"Go to Lucerne, in May (and here followed the name of the Swiss hotel Paul knew so well) and there thou wilt find him, without fail.

"Comfort him, I charge thee. It must ever be for thee a sacred duty. And, child! I would not have my lover left alone, to go through life with the shadow of his great grief hanging ever over him. There will still be sunlight in the world —and love. And Paul will be in his prime.

"Then will it be the high noon of his life. But what of love, for him? Ah! I scarce dare dream that dream. But believe this, sweet Natalie, Death would lose half its dread could I but know that Paul and thou couldst love."

Paul sat like one who saw a vision. Unknowingly he plucked the young buds

from the rose-tree by the bench—and crushed them. Far away mourned a delirious nightingale; and a weeping willow softly shivered. The moon looked down from the midst of heaven; the infinite celestial vault increased until it became yet more infinite; it burned and breathed; all the earth gleamed with silvery lustre; the air was wonderful, at once fresh and overpowering, full of sweetness; it was an ocean of perfumes.

Divine night! Magical night! The forests, full of shade, were motionless, and cast their vast shadows. The pools were calm; the cold and darkness of the waters lay mournfully enclosed in the dark walls of the garden. The virgin thickets of young cherry trees timidly stretched their roots into the chill earth, and from time to time shook their leaves, as if they were angry and indignant that

the beautiful Zephyr, the wind of night, glided suddenly toward them and covered them with kisses.

All the landscape slept. On high all breathed—all was beautiful—solemn, The vastness and wondrousness possessed Paul's soul; and crowds of silvery visions emerged softly from their hiding places. Divine night! Magical night!

Suddenly all came to life; the forests, the pools, the *steppes*. The majestic voice of the nightingale burst forth again, now in a paeon of praise. It seemed as if the moon, to listen to it, stood still in the midst of heaven. Then the song ceased. All was silent.

Paul and his lady rose then, and hand in hand, walking softly as if in the presence of one that was not dead, but sleeping, they sought the house together. And as they reached the doorway, Paul saw

there for the first time, inscribed on the lintel in letters of gold, now strangely silvered in that marvellous light:

"On thy house will the blessing of the Lord rest for evermore."

THE END.

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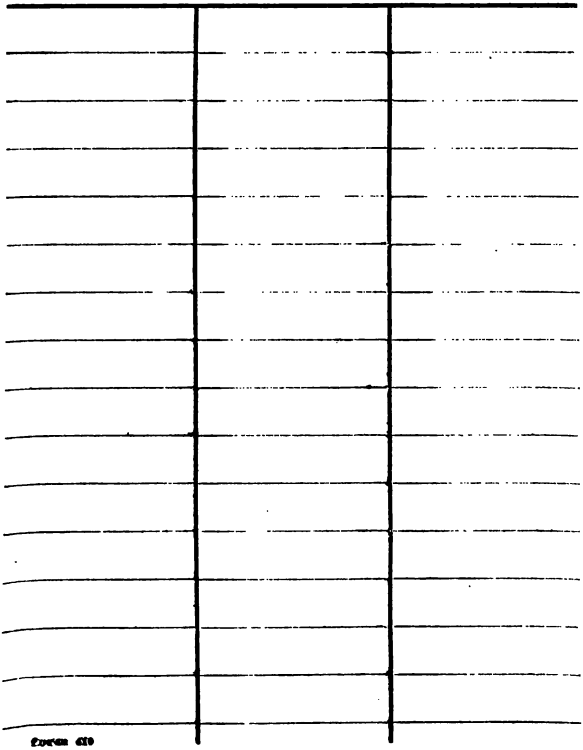
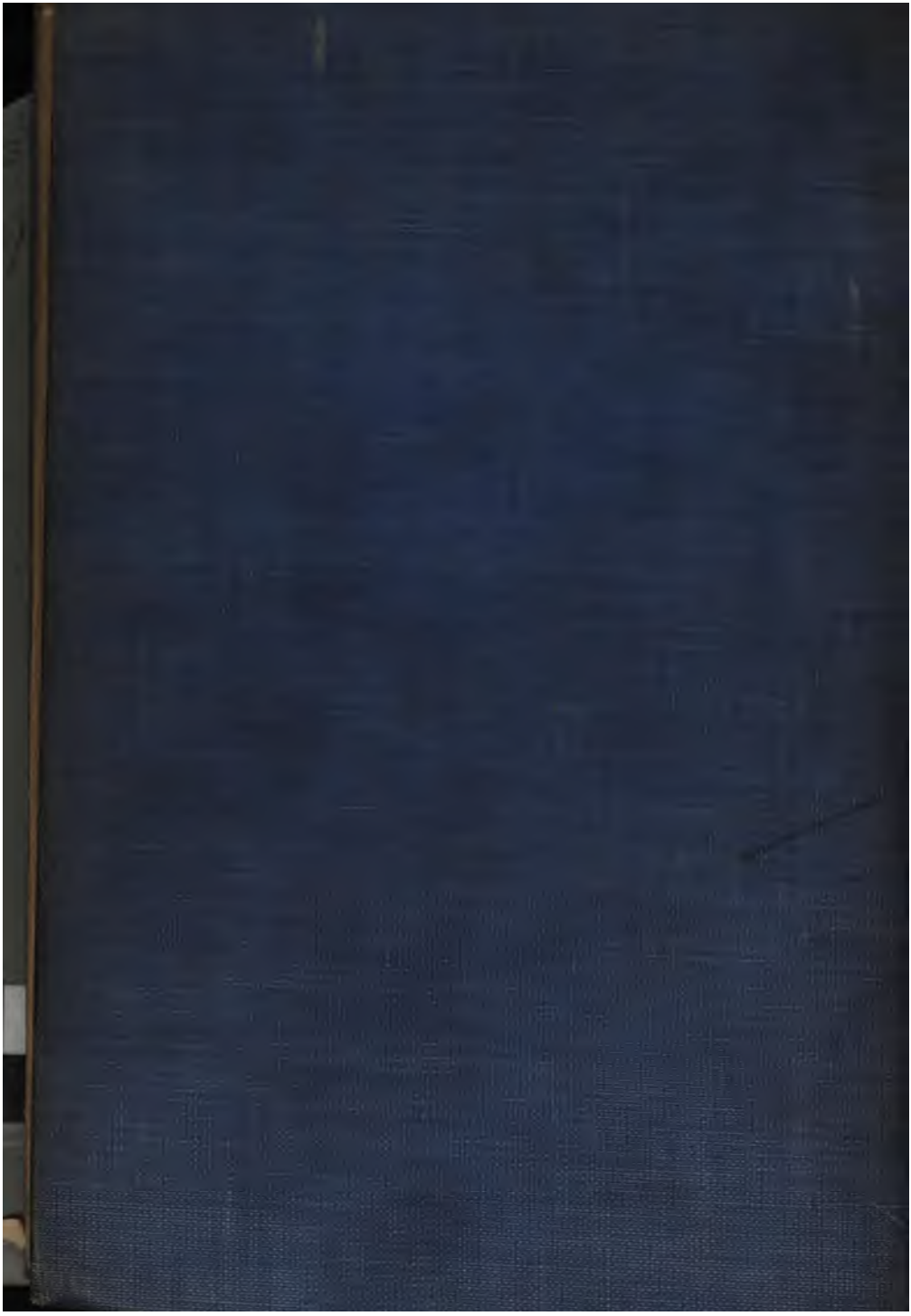
Form 419